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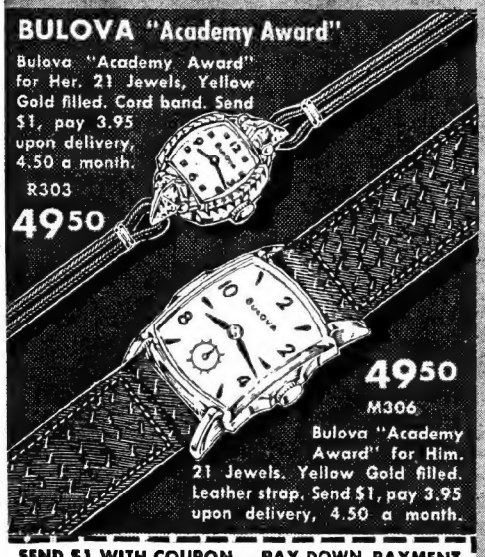

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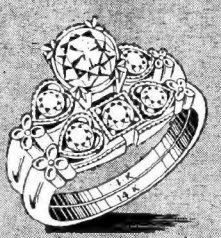

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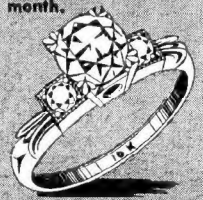

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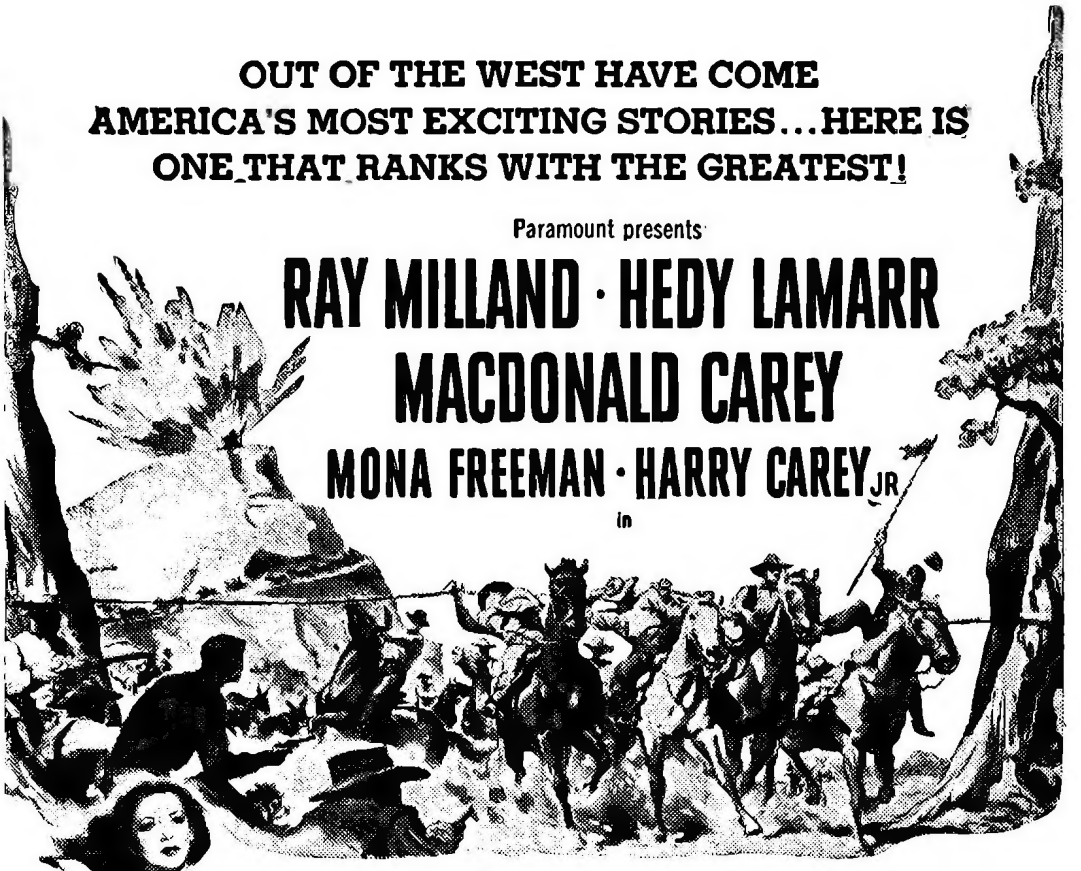

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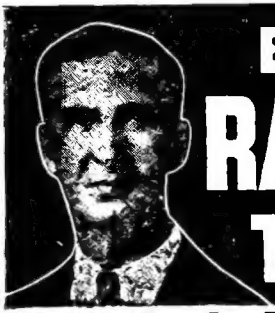

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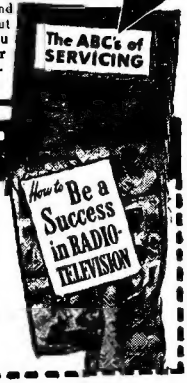

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The day that Theo walked into Tony's place, Ernie was going to blast her with a .38—as cold-bloodedly as she had gotten rid of three other men.

But when black-haired, black-hearted Theo did come back—to remind Ernie of Piggy Malone's fall from a horse—and to take the horn man for another ride. . .

Tony was unexpected company . . . in Robert Turner's smashing novel—"Slay, Maestro, Slay!"—in the December issue, published November 3rd.

SLAYERS

High-Tension Jim Bennett Detective Novelette

By ROBERT MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE

Warning in Lead

I WALKED away from the lights and the noise of the Western Lodge and moved in the moonlight across the broad lawn toward the corral. I wanted a few moments alone with Jackson Wilson, but his broad figure in the white evening jacket was not in sight.

I was half amused, half amazed at this cow-country oasis in the middle of northern Ohio. It was like a dude ranch in Texas, and yet it wasn't. The people were more serious about their Western lore,

BURN SLOW

Keep away from luscious Julia,
the boozed-up playboy was warned . . .
but he hired detective Jim Bennett—
and got the shock of his life.

I grabbed her around the waist . . . she struggled violently.

and about their horses, and their clothes.

Jackson Wilson didn't fit in, but his wife did—perfectly. I was looking forward to seeing her, in boots, levis and flannel shirt, ride her little palomino in the rodeo the next day. But right now I wasn't interested in Julia Wilson. I wanted to talk to her husband, and this was my chance—if I could find him.

As I walked past the white-washed feed barn, a soft voice spoke from the shadows. "Evenin', pardner."

I paused, and then moved toward the building. Jeff Cantrell, the lean wrangler from Montana, hired by the Western Lodge to give it authentic atmosphere, was leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. "Shindig all over?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Nice night," he said.

I agreed, and then asked, "Did a big man in a white coat walk past here a few minutes ago?"

"Smokin' a stogie?"

"That's him."

"He headed for the corral."

"Thanks," I said, and I gazed back toward the big sprawling lodge. Through the trees I saw the lights in the rooms blink out one by one. The moonlight lay heavy and bright over the broad lawn, and the shadows were black and still. A soft night wind fanned my face, and I moved my feet restlessly.

"You ridin' in the rodeo tomorrow?" Jeff Cantrell asked.

"Hell, no," I said. I was thinking of what I would say to Jackson Wilson when I found him.

From the direction of the corral a horse whinnied nervously.

Cantrell said, "Horses are restless tonight—like out on the range when a wolf's about." He paused, and his cigarette made a bright spark in the shadow. "Horses are mighty smart. Had me a little mare once. She kept me from steppin' on a rattler. I was gatherin' firewood in the evening dusk when suddenly—"

A sharp clear *crack!* sounded in the night, from beyond the corral. I looked quickly at Cantrell. He flung his cigarette to the ground, his lean face intent.

"Gun," he said, and he ran toward the corral. I followed him. The horses were milling around. Julia Wilson's little palomino stood by the rail, his head raised in alarm, his nostrils wide. "Easy, boy," Cantrell muttered as we ran past. There was a path leading back through the shrubbery away from the corral, and we pounded along it.

Abruptly Cantrell stopped, and he held out a warning arm. I paused, and moved up slowly beside him.

A man lay on his face in the path. In the moonlight we could clearly see the black hole in the back of his white coat. A lighted cigar lay beside his still hand, and I saw the bright glow and the smoke curling slowly upward. . . .

ON A hot afternoon in August I first met Randall Maybrock. The typewritten note which he laid on my desk read: *Stay away from Julia. Next time my aim will be better.*

I pretended to read the note a couple of times while I tried to figure it out. It didn't make much sense. Not to me. It didn't sound right for the type of note it was supposed to be. But I could be wrong. I read it again, and I didn't get any place. I looked up at Randall Maybrock.

He was wearing a soft Shetland jacket and a plaid sport shirt open at the neck. He had a broad sunburned face, a short thick nose, and a wide, rather loose mouth. His crisp red hair was receding from each side of his forehead, and his eyes were red-lidded and sleepy-looking. I caught a rich aroma of scotch whiskey, but he was sober.

I guessed that he'd been sober for at least six or eight hours. I had never met

Randall Maybrock before, but I'd heard of him. He was kind of a local character, and his name appeared fairly often in the press. The stories usually concerned drunken driving, blondes, and night club brawls. I had heard somewhere that several years previously he had been left eighty thousand dollars, the entire savings of his father, who had been a hard-working life insurance salesman.

I said, "Who's Julia?"

He sighed, and gazed at his manicured fingernails. "Julia Wilson, I suppose."

The name was familiar to me, also via the newspapers. Julia Wilson was a striking brunette with slanting eyes and a figure built for a bathing suit. She was a prominent member of the horse and country club crowd which inhabited the green hills east of town known as Erie Valley. Her husband, Jackson Wilson, was somebody big in Northern Lines, Incorporated, a company which operated a fleet of large ore boats on the Great Lakes.

Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Wilson practically kept the local society editors in copy. Julia Wilson was not adverse to posing for the gentlemen of the press, and the g.o.t.p. loved her, naturally. Especially the Sunday pictorial boys.

I raised my eyebrows. "Mrs. Jackson Wilson?"

He shifted his gaze from his fingernails to the window. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "But I don't know what to think. I admire Julia—as a friend. I've taken her to dinner a few times, but I never tried to hide anything from him. In fact, he's a friend of mine." He turned and pointed a blunt finger at the note on my desk.

"I can't believe that he'd write a note like that. If he had anything to tell me, he'd come to me personally and tell me, damn fast." His sunburned forehead wrinkled into a frown, and he pounded a

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big fist gently against a palm. "I I don't know what to think"

I couldn't help saying it. "I thought you preferred blondes," I murmured

He didn't like it at all. He flushed, and glared at me. "Bennett," he said in a level voice, "I came here to ask for your professional services, which I will pay for. If you don't want my business, I'll take it somewhere else."

I was way off base, and I knew it. Rule number one in the agent's manual of The National Detective Agency is Courtesy to Clients. Even clients like Randall Maybrock. I held up a soothing hand, and I smiled.

"Sorry, Mr. Maybrock. It's just that the papers—"

"To hell with the papers," he broke in. "Don't believe all that garbage you read in the papers" He stared at me, his red face sullen and stubborn Then he gave me a half smile "I guess I'm a little touchy about blondes, Bennett."

"I wish I could afford 'em," I said, and I meant it.

"Have you got a drink?" he asked abruptly.

I swung around in my chair and called into the adjoining office to Sandy Hollis, the agency secretary. "Hey, Sandy, is there a bottle in the office?"

She stopped typing and came to the door. Sandy is a tall slender girl with glossy brown hair and few freckles over her short nose. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Bennett," she said coolly. "Agency regulations, you know." She knew that there was half a bottle of bourbon on the shelf in the wash room, but she also knew that if I'd wanted to put it out to Maybrock I wouldn't have asked her.

I looked at Maybrock and shrugged sadly.

He said mockingly, "I thought all private detectives kept a bottle in their desks. Rye, I believe."

"You've been reading too many books," I told him "This is a business office, and I'm just the district agent. We have rules, like a chain grocery Besides, I don't drink rye. Not if I can help it."

He stood up. "Let's find a bar. I need a drink Even rye."

I stood up, too, and put on my hat. I winked at Sandy Hollis, said, "I'll be back," and I went out with Randall Maybrock.

I took him to a little bar around the corner. He had scotch and water, and I had bourbon and soda We carried our glasses to a booth in a dark corner, where Maybrock said, "As you might have gathered from that note, somebody shot at me last night That's when I decided to come to you. I was driving into my garage when a bullet hit the side of the car."

"Where were you last night?"

He fidgited with his glass. "At Julia Wilson's. Jackson is away on a trip to Duluth, and she asked me to come over to fill in at bridge After the other guests left, I stayed a while to have a nightcap with her. Then I left When I drove into my garage—wham!"

"Is Mr Wilson still in Duluth?"

"I guess so. Julia said he'd be back early tomorrow morning."

"When did you receive that note?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Where was it mailed from?"

"The Erie Valley post office."

I finished my drink, motioned to the bartender for another round, and said, "Who else is friendly with Mrs. Wilson? Anybody in particular?"

"How the hell do I know? Julia lives her own life. She has many friends, of course."

"Men?"

HE SHRUGGED impatiently. "I don't know. She and Jackson seem to get along all right, if that's what you're getting at. But you know how those things are. Jackson works pretty hard, and she's

alone a lot He used to work on the freighters, you know, when he was a kid, and he worked himself up He still likes to go out with a cargo, and work with the crew. That's where he's been the last few days Julia doesn't like it, and maybe you can't blame her After all, Jackson is grown up now She thinks it's kid stuff."

"Are you in love with Julia Wilson?" I asked him

He gazed at me steadily. "I like Julia. As a friend."

"You said that. What do you want me to do?"

The barkeep brought the drinks, and he waited until we were alone again Then he said quietly, "I want you to try and learn who wrote that note, and who shot at me last night. I didn't mind the note, but a bullet –well, that's different. I want you to stick around me for a few days as a, well, sort of a bodyguard Just until this thing is cleared up."

"I've got a better idea," I said. "Why don't you just stay away from Julia Wilson?"

His broad red face took on a stubborn expression. "Why should I? I've nothing to hide Julia would think it very odd if I suddenly avoided her After all, we're old friends."

"Yeah, yeah," I said wearily. "I know. But if I hang around with you, how are you going to explain me to your valley friends?"

"Don't worry about that You'll be my guest. Maybe from -from Arizona. How's that?"

"All right, pardner Do I wear a six-shooter and spurs?"

He grinned. "That might not be a bad idea The crowd in the valley are going through a phase. Right now it's Western stuff. They've been practicing for weeks, and they've gotten up an amateur rodeo Tomorrow we're all going to the Western Lodge—that's kind of a combination dude ranch and resort hotel at the end of the valley. The rodeo will be held there over the weekend."

"In what event are you entered?" I asked him "Bronc busting?"

He smiled "I'm just a judge."

"Will Julia Wilson's husband be there?"

"Probably—if he gets back from Duluth" He gazed thoughtfully into his glass "I'd like to have you around, if you can make it."

I had planned to go pickerel trolling over the weekend with some cronies, but business was business. Also, I'll admit that the idea of meeting Julia Wilson had its appeal I had heard of the Western Lodge. Rates started at thirty dollars a day. I said:

"This is probably a silly question, but why don't you go to the police?"

"That *is* silly," he snapped. "What the hell good would they do me?"

"The agency rates are fifty dollars a day," I said I paused, and then, thinking of the tariff at the Western Lodge, I added, "Plus expenses."

He nodded carelessly. "All right. Do you want an advance?"

I shook my head. "You'll get a bill from the office when the job is completed. I'll do my best, but I don't guarantee anything."

He nodded. "Good enough. I'll meet you at the Lodge tomorrow afternoon." He turned to catch the bartender's attention "Now, I believe I'll have another drink Will you join me?"

Three drinks and forty minutes later, we left the bar. I was feeling fine, but Randall Maybrock was weaving a little. He led me to where his car was parked, and showed me a neat hole drilled in the metal of the left front door The car was a cream colored coupe, fairly new. He pointed a wavering finger at the hole.

"There it is, Bennett. Bullet hole. Damn near got me. Scared me stiff, I tell you. Could have killed me." He

teetered on the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets, his red face moist with perspiration. He stared intently at the bullet hole, as if it held a kind of fascination for him. "A hell of a thing," he muttered.

I agreed with him, and I said, "I'll see you tomorrow afternoon at the Western Lodge. O.K.?" I started to move away.

He waved at me cheerfully. "Right, Bennett. Right-o."

I went back to the office and put my feet on the desk. It was almost quitting time, and Sandy Hollis was slamming drawers in the adjoining office. I picked up the phone and called the offices of Northern Lines, Incorporated, and asked for Mr. Wilson. A crisp-voiced female told me that Mr. Wilson was out of town, and would not return to the office until Monday. I hung up. That was that. So far, so good.

The five o'clock whistles began to blow all over town, and Sandy came out of her office. "You had a caller," she announced, "and when I tell you who, you'll be heartbroken that you missed her."

"A movie star," I said.

She moved to the door. "The number is on your desk. She wants you to call her."

I glanced at the penciled number on the desk pad. It didn't mean a thing to me.

"Mrs. Jackson Wilson," Sandy said.

I was surprised, but I nodded knowingly. "Ah, yes. What did Julia want?"

"She refused to talk to the office help. She wished to speak with Mr. James Bennett, personally."

"I'll call her when I get around to it. Good night, Miss Hollis."

Sandy gave me a crooked grin. "Don't break your arm reaching for the phone. Good night." She went out, and I heard her high heels clicking briskly in the corridor. I lifted the phone and called the number on my desk pad.

A girl with a voice like black velvet answered. I said, "Mrs. Wilson, please. Mr. Bennett is returning her call."

"Just a moment, sir."

I waited. Presently the same voice said, "Can Mrs. Wilson call you back?"

"Sure. How soon?"

"She says five minutes, sir. What is your number, please?"

I gave it to her, and the receiver clicked in my ear. I lit a cigarette and waited. In six minutes my phone jangled. I picked it up, said, "Yes?"

A pleasant, husky voice said, "This is Mrs. Wilson. I am sorry I couldn't talk a few minutes ago. There were people in the room. I'm calling now from the extension in my bedroom. Mr. Bennett, I want to see you."

"What about?"

"I can't tell you now. But it's very important—really. Can you meet me at, oh, say ten thirty tonight?"

I said I could.

"Oh, good. Thank you so much. I'll be at the south gate waiting for you."

"The south gate?"

"Yes, of our place. We're the third house on the valley road, on your left, toward the lake. Go past the front drive and turn left in a lane. It's a white wooden gate at the end of the lane."

"What's wrong with the hotel bar?"

"Really, Mr. Bennett." Her voice had turned slightly cool. "Shall I expect you?"

"You shall."

"Thank you." The receiver banged in my ear.

I GLANCED up at the office clock. Sixteen minutes after five in the afternoon. It was a long time until ten-thirty. I called Tim Brady. He was a feature writer for one of the big dailies. I was lucky, he was still in his office.

"Tim, this is Jim Bennett. How about a couple of drinks, and dinner?"

"What do you want out of me now?"

"Just companionship. I'm lonely."

"Like hell I think I'll begin sending a monthly bill to the agency for services rendered."

"The Round Table? In fifteen minutes?" I ignored his remark Tim Brady was a reliable source of information to me, and he knew it

"Better make it a half hour I've got to finish a story on a cat playing mother to four orphaned collie pups"

"Finish it. I'll be waiting"

The Round Table was a small bar off Euclid Avenue frequented by newspaper men, junior executives who had clawed their way to the ten thousand a year class, and severely tailored career girls. I had time for two martinis before Tim showed up

He was a tall lanky man who never wore anything but a gray flannel suit, a soft white shirt, and a black knit tie It was like a uniform. His only change, as far as I knew, was from a brown snap brim in winter to a tan panama in summer. It was six o'clock when he slouched into the Round Table, sat at the bar beside me, and ordered a bourbon and water.

"Did you put the cat and the collies to bed?" I asked him.

"Yep. The cat's name is Lucille. Tomorrow I'm doing a story on a woman who subsists on nothing but celery, soda crackers and sassafras tea She's a hundred and two years old"

"It ain't worth it," I said "What do you know about Randall Maybrock?"

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Hah!"

"I'm buying the drinks," I told him.

"Make that double," he called to the bartender, and he gazed dreamily at his lean reflection in the mirror back of the bar. "Randall Maybrock," he murmured. "Playboy, so called Lady's man. A night club athlete A lush who doesn't roll in the gutter. Not quite. Travels with the crowd from the valley. Or did Partial to blondes, usually. His old man worked hard to save a few thousand bucks, and now Randall is spending it Has spent it. Soon he'll have to go to work—or starve He's broke—or damn near it."

I pricked up my ears "Broke?"

The bartender brought the double bourbon, and Brady took a long swallow. Then he nodded knowingly. "Broke, I said. The next installment will be forthcoming as soon as I have a fresh drink in my hot little hand"

I grinned, and motioned to the bartender.

"Randall Maybrock has been living on credit for some time," Brady said. "Wine and women have gobbled up his dad's hard earned dough. A month ago he took his last ten thousand and went out to Las Vegas to recoup. He didn't. The state of Nevada is now richer by the gambling tax on ten grand." The ice rattled in his glass, and he reached for his second double bourbon.

"Go on," I said.

"That's all. Period."

"Well," I said, "I guess that takes care of Randall Maybrock. Now, tell me about Julia Wilson."

He took a swallow of his fresh drink, and whistled softly. "How you do get around" Once more he gazed into the mirror, like a fortune teller looking into a crystal ball "Julia Wilson. A newspaper man's dream Beautiful, friendly, rich, cooperative. Married to Jackson Wilson, a self-made man, like they say in the story books Julia is big stuff in society circles Prominent in charity drives. Likes horses, rides a lot. Won ribbons at the horse show. Can't swim, but likes swim suits She should."

He paused, and made an hour glass motion with his hands "Wow!" He lifted his glass "I'll drink to Julia anytime Who's next?"

"That's all for now. Want another drink before we eat?"

"Certainly. I always want another

drink And, furthermore, why eat?"

"Gotta keep up your strength to pound that typewriter," I told him

He sighed "If a guy just didn't have to work Now, take tonight I got a date for eight o'clock to interview an old biddy who collects stuffed owls Got thousands of 'em Just owls"

He told me more about the owls, and presently we moved to a corner table and ate French fried potatos and sirloin steak. Afterwards, Tim Brady left to keep his appointment with the owl lady, and I went back up to the office For a while I dozed with my feet on the desk.

At nine thirty I washed my face, combed my hair, and decided that my shirt would pass inspection in the dark by the south gate of Jackson Wilson's place. I hesitated a minute about taking a gun. Then I dropped a flat little 25 automatic into my inside coat pocket, locked the office, and went down to the street once more I took one of the two agency cars from the garage in the next block, and headed east across town

I hit the edge of Erie Valley at a quarter after ten, and drove in the moonlight past broad lawns and iron gates. Presently I spotted the lane leading back to the south gate of the Jackson Wilson place. I slowed down, and started to turn.

A flat report made me jump I heard a *thunk* and a splintering sound as a bullet crashed through the right door and smashed into the glass dial of the dash clock I jammed on the brakes, jerked open the door, and almost fell out to the road in my haste to find cover I crouched beside the car in the road on my hands and knees and listened The night was very quiet The car motor had stalled when I'd stopped. Now it made small ticking sounds as it cooled in the night air.

I took the little automatic from my pocket, cautiously raised my head over the hood. Nothing but hedges and lawn and the quiet road on the moonlight No movement, nothing Just moonlit silence.

I reached into the car and turned off the headlights Then I ran stooping for the lane I crouched for maybe two minutes before I ran swiftly, hugging the hedge. I came to a white gate It was standing ajar

A black-top drive curved away through a park like area Through the dark trees I saw the dim yellow lights of the big house on a rise of ground Lake Erie, I knew, was maybe a hundred yards beyond. Julia Wilson wasn't waiting for me. I looked at my wrist watch in the moonlight Ten twenty five I waited.

At a quarter of eleven I skirted the road and moved slowly over the grass toward the house. I approached from the rear, stood in the deep shadow of a clump of fat fir trees Randall Maybrock's cream-colored coupe was parked in the drive. I walked slowly around the house, trying to stay in the shadows.

There was a light in a big living room, but heavy drapes were pulled across the wide window. At the bottom of the window, in the center, the drapes were parted a tiny crack. I stooped down and peeked through. It was like looking at a small lighted stage.

They were standing before a huge sandstone fireplace. On a table beside them was a whiskey decanter, two tall glasses, and a silver soda syphon I recognized Julia Wilson from newspaper photos Her black hair was tied back with a red ribbon, and she was wearing a long red silken gown Randall Maybrock was still wearing the Shetland jacket and the plaid shirt They were standing close together, facing each other. Maybrock's hands were on her shoulders, and she was smiling up at him. As I watched, he drew her close, and she clung to him, her face against his chest.

I stood up straight, walked across the moonlit lawn, and down the lane to my

car. I drove back to town. When I reached the garage I borrowed some tools from the night mechanic and dug the bullet out of the dash clock. It was a good-sized chunk of lead, and I guessed that it was about a .38.

The night mechanic came up and inspected the hole in the door. "You earned your money tonight, huh, Jim?"

"I always earn my money," I told him. "How about putting in a new clock, and plugging that hole?"

"Okay, Jim."

I got into the other agency car, and drove home.

CHAPTER TWO

Sapped . . . Again

THE next day was Friday. I packed a bag, went down to the office, cleared up some desk work, had lunch with Detective Sergeant Dennis Rockingham, who sold me a dozen tickets to the policemen's ball. Then I did a quick job of checking a beneficiary for a life insurance company. Afterwards, I went back to the office, dictated a report to Sandy Hollis, and told her that I would be out at the Western Lodge for the weekend.

She raised her smooth eyebrows. "Business, or pleasure?"

"Business."

"Nice business." Sandy sighed. "Won't you need a secretary with you?"

"Not at thirty dollars a day."

She sighed again. "Have a nice time, Jim."

"Strictly business, Miss Hollis." I patted her cheek, and went out. It was five o'clock in the afternoon when I drove once more through the rolling green hills of Erie Valley.

When I came to Jackson Wilson's place, I turned in and stopped before the

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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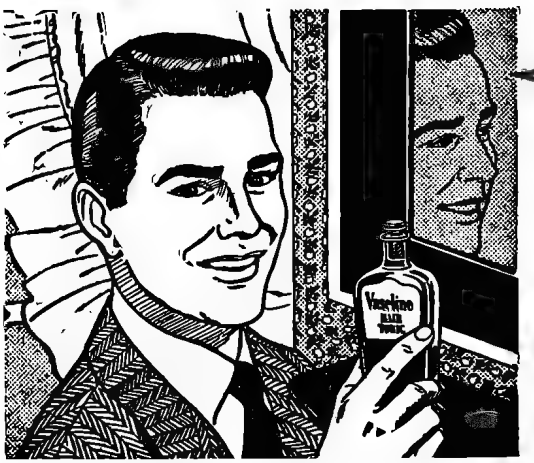

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big house Through the trees beyond I could see the blue green of Lake Erie A trim little red headed maid answered the bell.

"Is Mrs Wilson in?" I asked her

"Are you the man about the water softener?"

"No Just tell her that Mr Bennett is here"

"Mrs Wilson has gone for the week-end"

"Mr Wilson, too?"

"Yes" She hesitated, and then added hopefully, "Maybe you're the man about rolling the tennis court?"

"I could be," I said "Does the court need rolling?"

"It might," she said There was a glint, a something, in her greenish eyes, and she gave me a slow smile "It's kind of lonesome around here today It's the cook's day off and Harold he's the gardener—he didn't come home last night"

"All alone in this big house, huh?"

She lowered her lashes modestly Like many redheads, she had a sprinkling of freckles over her short nose I opened the screen door and stepped inside "May I come in?" I asked grinning down at her

She laughed It was a soft, musical sound "Well, now, I like that!"

"You like what? Scotch? Do you suppose the Wilsons have some?"

She stopped laughing, and said suspiciously "You married?"

"Not me, honey You know something? I'm glad Mrs Wilson isn't home"

She gave me a sly smile She had little white teeth, like a kitten's "Me, too. What's your first name?"

"Jim"

"How do you like your scotch, Jim? With ginger ale?"

I shuddered "No, honey Straight Water on the side"

She laughed gaily, and twirled away from me, her black skirt flying, and I had a glimpse of a pair of slender nylon clad legs "Oh, this is fun," she cried, dancing down the hall "Come on Jim"

I followed her into a big gleaming kitchen She got a bottle from a cupboard, placed it on a table I sat down, and she produced glasses and ice As she poured the scotch, she said, "Do you think I'm awful?"

"No, I think you're real nice What's your name?"

"Mildred" She poured ginger ale over her scotch

Watching her, I shuddered again, and took a sip from my glass, followed it with a drink of water She sat down opposite me, and took a long swallow from her glass "This is a good job," she said, "but I get so darn lonesome I got a boy friend His name is Chester He drives a coal truck But Mrs Wilson don't allow him to come out here, and it's hard for me to get into town I go in with Harold sometimes, on my day off, but he gets beered up and forgets to bring me back It's really hard on a girl I like a good time *once* in a while"

"Sure," I said "When did Mr and Mrs Wilson leave?"

"Oh, about an hour ago Mr Wilson got home at breakfast time Been out on the lake with one of the ore boats. He goes on the boats all of the time Mr Wilson does. But he's nice, though Kids me, and calls me Millie They went up the valley for the weekend"

"So Mrs Wilson was alone last night?"

She gave me a sly smile "Oh, I wouldn't say that" She giggled "Mr Maybrock was here came about ten-thirty I know you won't tell I was supposed to be in bed, but I sneaked downstairs and listened in the hall"

"Mr Maybrock is a friend of the Wilsons?" I asked innocently

She giggled again, and sipped at her drink "Of *Missus* Wilson's, if you ask me He don't come around when Mr

Wilson is here. If I told you all the things I've seen go on." For an instant her small red mouth was sullen Then she shrugged her plump little shoulders.

"But it's no skin off my nose I just work here " She gazed at me with bright eyes, and placed a finger thoughtfully to her lips "I know," she said. "You're the man about the crack in the swimming pool "

"That's me," I said. "I'd better go out and take a look at it "

"There ain't no crack in the swimming pool," she said, and she added darkly, "There's funny things going on around here "

"You said it," I told her. "What did Mr. Maybrock and Mrs. Wilson talk about last night?"

"I know," she said. "You're the man about the leak in the downstairs bathroom."

I finished my scotch. "There ain't no leak in the downstairs bathroom," I said.

"That's right." She giggled, and poured more scotch. "Mr. Maybrock wanted Mrs Wilson to divorce Mr. Wilson and marry him. That's what he asked her."

"What did Mrs. Wilson say?"

"I couldn't hear what she said to that. They were quiet for a long time " She pushed the bottle toward me "Drink up, Jim What's your last name?"

"Doakes."

She eyed me narrowly. "You said it was Bennett What're you trying to do—deceive me?"

"James Bennett Doakes," I said. "I'm the man about the hole in the roof."

She laughed, and we chanted in unison, "There ain't no hole in the roof "

BEHIND me, I heard the kitchen door open, and I turned quickly. A thin brown faced man in a blue shirt and overalls peered in at us.

"Harold!" Mildred said indignantly. "Where in the world have you been?"

"Sleeping," he said. "Down by the rose trellis Hey, Chester just drove in with his coal truck."

"Chester! Here?" She stood up Her hands fluttered to her hair, and then smoothed her apron. "What's he doing out here?"

"I saw him in town last night, and I told him about the Missus and Mister going away today. He said he'd lay off work and come out."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she wailed. "Is he dressed up?"

"You bet And he's got his truck all shined." Harold eyed the scotch bottle, and ran his tongue over his lips "What're you drinking, Millie?"

"Never mind," she snapped. "Tell Chester I'll be right out."

Harold withdrew reluctantly, and I stood up. "Brushing me off, huh?" I said stiffly.

"Aw, now, Jim, how'd I know that Chester would show up?"

"It's all right," I said in a hurt voice. "If you prefer Chester to me, very well." I moved to the hall door.

She came up and stood close to me. "Aw, Jim, don't be that way. Can't you come back some other time?"

"I'm afraid Chester would be here."

"You let me know ahead, and he won't be," she said softly. "I promise. Maybe I could meet you in the beer joint down the road."

"Well," I said, "all right."

She stood on her tip toes, and kissed me lightly on the mouth For a minute I was sorry that Chester had turned up. "Doakes," she whispered. "Jim Doakes. That's some name. But you're nice."

"You're nice, too," I said. I turned and walked quickly down the big hall to the front door Behind me I heard her high heels clicking over the kitchen floor, and the screen door slammed. "Chester!" I heard her squeal "Oh, Chester."

I got into my car, and drove away . .

It was almost seven o'clock when I checked into the Western Lodge It was an enormous one-story building, ranch house style, and the whole place was done in an elaborate Western motif In the huge lobby was a big stone fireplace, mounted animal heads, and heavy rustic furniture. A genial clerk wearing a red checkered shirt and a tooled belt greeted me, and assigned me to room number 22

He told me that Randall Maybrock had checked in earlier in the day, and was in room number 19, across the hall from mine However, Mr Maybrock was probably in the bar, he added I guessed that he probably was, too, and I asked about Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Wilson. He told me that they were established in a suite in the north wing, and said, "I hope you folks have nice weather for the big rodeo"

I said I hoped so, too, and I followed an undersized bellhop dressed like a Navaho to my room I tipped the Navaho a quarter, and he looked at it in disgust, grunted, "Ugh," and left without opening my windows I opened the windows myself, and gazed out over an elaborate layout of landscaped lawn shrubbery, and bridle paths

The corral and the stables, I guessed, were on the other side of the building I left the room, walked down the hall to a rustic door, and peered out I was right I saw a big rail corral, a string of white washed stables, and a hay barn. There were about twenty horses in the corral.

I spotted Julia Wilson perched on the top rail patting the eager nose of a palomino mare. Julia was wearing blue jeans, high-heeled boots, and a flat black sombrero. With her vivid coloring and black hair she looked like a bright advertisement straight out of a Texas chamber of commerce travel folder. A big bronzed man in a tan gabardine suit and a dark green sport shirt stood beside her, and she was laughing down at him. I guessed that he was her husband, Jackson Wilson, home from the ore run to Duluth

I went back to my room, unpacked my bag, shaved and showered, and put on gray flannel slacks and a tweed jacket. My only concession to the Western atmosphere was a pale blue sport shirt with a stitched collar and pockets

As I went out, I saw a small blonde girl rapping softly on a door across the hall. She was wearing a plain white linen suit and bright multi colored snake-skin sandals with incredibly high heels Her yellow hair fell over her shoulders in soft folds, and from where I stood, viewing her from the back, she looked as cute and as pretty as anything I'd seen in a long time

Then I saw that the number on the door before which she was standing was 19 I said, "You'll probably find Mr. Maybrock in the bar."

She turned quickly. Her face matched up with the rest of her. She had a golden tanned skin, clear blue eyes, a red well-shaped mouth Her silky eyebrows, the color of good mild tobacco raised in surprise Then she said quietly, "Thank you," and she started to move past me.

I walked along beside her The top of her head was on a level with my shirt pockets "I'm going to the bar, too," I told her "The name's Bennett. I'm a friend of Randall's."

She looked up at me. "Really? I don't believe he's ever mentioned you to me. I'm Randall's fiancée."

It was my turn to say, "Really?"

She laughed happily. "I'm Paula Sawyer I just drove up from Akron. Randall insisted that I attend this what do you call it—rodeo?"

I grinned down at her. "Where are your boots and spurs?"

She laughed again. For such a small girl, she had a surprisingly deep and husky voice. "I'm not much of a cowgirl, I guess. And I'm afraid of horses. They

terrify me. Guns, too." She shivered a little. "I think it's kind of silly, this playing cowboy. Randall certainly isn't the type. I can't imagine why he wanted me to come here. But here I am."

We reached the big lobby, and I guided her across to the bar entrance. It was a long room, dimly lighted, with sawdust on the floor and a brass rail running along the base of the mahogany bar. A huge gilt-framed painting of a buxom blonde, filmily clad, and reclining on a bearskin rug, hung back of the bar over the long mirror and the tiers of bottles.

The place was about half filled with people sitting at round tables in the space before the bar. Julia Sawyer and I spotted Randall Maybrock at the same instant. He was sitting alone at the far end of the bar. From the way he was hunched over I knew that he'd had more than his quota of alcohol for the day.

"There he is," I said to the girl. "All yours. I'll see him later."

She smiled up at me. It was a nice smile, friendly and warm. "Thank you, Mr. Bennett. Will I see you at the rodeo?"

"PROBABLY," I said, but I saw that her eyes were upon Maybrock, and I left her. I walked across the lobby and out into the hot dusk of the evening. I circled the big building and headed for the corral. Julia Wilson and her husband were gone. Beside the hay barn a lanky sunburned man in dusty high-heeled boots and a faded gray flannel shirt was currying a chestnut stallion. I walked over to him.

He said over his shoulder, "Hi, pardner. You got a horse here?"

I shook my head. "Not me. Do they put on a pretty good show?"

He straightened up, pushed his battered Stetson to the back of his head, and drawled, "Not bad—for dudes. They do pretty good, especially on the ridin'. None of 'em ain't much with a rope, or bulldoggin'. But I'll say this, they got good horses. Mostly Western cow ponies—none of these blooded horse cow critters. Now, take that palomino of Mrs. Wilson's. Prettiest worker I ever saw. Straight from Montana.

"That's where I come from. West of the Powder River, Custer County. This outfit hired me for the summer. Pretty good job. Soft. Bettern' ridin' the range for seventy bucks a month and my keep. Some right pretty gals around here, too." He gave me a leathery grin. "Corn country cowgirls, I call 'em."

I laughed. "That's a good description. But I suppose this playing cowboy is just as good a sport as golf, or fishing, or fox hunting, or anything else."

He nodded. "That's right, pardner. I gotta laugh sometimes, but they try hard." He held out a hand. "I'm Jeff Cantrell."

We shook hands. I told him my name, and offered him a cigarette. He refused,

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and began to roll one from a bag of tobacco he took from his shirt pocket "Just like in the movies," I said, grinning

He smiled as he licked the paper "I'll tell you something, Jim I'd rather have a tailor made any day, but the dudes like to see me roll 'em, and I gotta keep in practice "

"How are you with a six gun?" I asked him.

He smiled, turned and walked into the barn, and came out holding a long barreled Colt 44 with a bone handle He twirled it expertly. "You toss up a can," he said, "and I can draw and plug it six times before it hits the ground."

"Get me a can," I said

He shook his head "Not now. It'd scare the guests. Come around in the morning, and we'll go back in the woods a piece "

"I'll do that," I promised. "So long, Jeff."

"So long, pardner."

I strolled back to the lodge, and entered the bar Randall Maybrock and Julia Sawyer were not there I sat on a stool and ordered a dry martini I was on my second one when a husky voice said beside me, "Drinking alone, Mr. Bennett?"

I turned. Paula Sawyer was climbing onto a stool beside me

"Not now," I said "What'll you have?"

She nodded at my g ass "The same - but double."

I glanced at her quickly. Her red mouth held a stubborn look, and her blue eyes were bright

I ordered for her, and then said, "Where's Randall?"

"Passed out," she said bitterly. "He's stiff on the bed in his room He asked me up here, and now he s drunk "

"Now you can have dinner with me," I said.

She looked at me with friendly eyes. "That's nice of you, Mr Bennett."

"Call me Jim "

"I'd be glad to have dinner with you, Jim After another double martini "

"Coming up," I said. While she drank her second double I had my third single. That was plenty for me

We had dinner at a corner table for two in the big rustic dining room, and we talked about everything from the music of the elder Strauss to the latest best-selling novel. I told her that I was a life insurance investigator, which was one-tenth true, and she said she was a nurse in an Akron hospital. Her mother was dead, and her father ran a gas station in Los Angeles. She didn't mention Randall Maybrock again, and neither did I. It was about nine o'clock when we finished our coffee.

As we walked out to the lobby, she said, "I'm tired, Jim. Thank you very much for the drinks, and the dinner."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course," she said, smiling, but there was a strained look about her eyes "Good night, Jim " She walked briskly away from me, and entered the corridor leading to the rooms

I waited a couple of minutes Then I walked down to Randall Maybrock's room. The door was unlocked, and I went in He was sprawled on the bed, breathing heavily. I guessed that he wouldn't move an eyelash until morning. I took off his shoes, tossed a light blanket over him, and opened the window.

Through the trees I could see the white stables, and the hay barn and the corral I pulled the blind against the morning sun, turned off the light, and went out. When I reached my room, I unlocked the door, and fumbled for the light switch in the darkness.

There was a faint rustling sound behind me I turned, but I was far too slow. A blinding light exploded inside my head, and I pitched forward into a well of blackness. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Two-Timing Romeo

I FELT cool hands on my face and a voice said sharply, "Mr Bennett!" I opened my eyes Except for a pounding pain in my head, it was like waking from a deep sleep I was instantly aware of my surroundings, and I knew that somebody had slugged me from behind as I had entered my room I wondered how long I had been out

Julia Wilson was bending over me, and her face was close to mine The clean scent of her perfume was all around me, and a lock of her black hair almost touched my chin She had changed her Western outfit to a thin black evening gown with long sleeves and a plunging neckline. The gown had nothing to do with Western atmosphere, unless it were the wide open spaces.

I felt a twinge of envy as I thought of Randall Maybrock, lying sodden on his bed in his room He was quite a boy at that, I decided, having two lovelies like Julia Wilson and Paula Sawyer involved in his life.

"Are you all right?" Julia Wilson asked anxiously.

I pushed myself to a sitting position. Tenderly I felt the back of my head. There was a lump behind my right ear, but I didn t feel any blood. "Sure," I said "I feel fine."

"What happened?" she asked swiftly. "Randall told me that you were here, and I came to your room to see you. Your door was open, and I found you lying here on the floor I can't stay long—Jackson is waiting for me in the lobby but I wanted to explain to you about last night About why I didn't meet you "

I know why you didn't meet me at the south gate, I thought grimly *You had a caller.* I glanced at the door, saw that she had closed it, and I looked up at her

"I didn't have a heart attack," I said. "Somebody slugged me Why didn't you meet me last night?"

"I couldn't," she said "Someone came, and I couldn't leave After they left, I tried to call you, but I couldn t get you. Then Jackson came home early this morning, and we drove out here this afternoon, and I didn't have a chance to get in touch with you I saw Randall Maybrock for a few minutes before dinner. I m afraid he was drunk. When he mumbled something about Jim Bennett being here, I asked the clerk He gave me your room number " She paused. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

I got slowly to my feet My knees were a little unsteady, but I made it to a chair without falling on my face. I tried to grin at Julia Wilson "You're a jinx," I said. "Last night somebody took a shot at me at the end of your lane, and tonight I get konked on the head I'm having more fun than a monkey in a peanut store. Why did you call me yesterday? What do you want?"

"Where's Randall?" she asked.

"In his room He's dead drunk."

"A fine thing with that nice little Sawyer girl here as his guest. They're engaged, you know."

I said I knew, and waited.

She opened a small black silk purse, took out a slip of paper, and handed it to me. I read. *If you know what's good for you, stay away from Randall Maybrock.* It was typewritten, like the note Maybrock had received.

Julia Wilson said, "It came yesterday morning in a plain envelope with an Erie Valley postmark In the afternoon Randall showed me a similar note he had received, and he said he was engaging you to find out who wrote it I didn't tell him about the note addressed to me, but I decided that I, too, would engage your services. I don't like things like that, and I want you to find out who wrote it. Then

I will know how to deal with the situation."

"I see," I said. "And Randall Maybrock is just a a friend?"

"I've known Randall for a long time," she said crisply. "He's unhappy, and a little mixed up right now. I feel sorry for him. But that's all." She paused, and lifted her chin. "I love my husband, Mr. Bennett. My friendship for Randall is – just that."

"Does your husband know about the note you received?"

She shook her head. "I haven't told anyone but you. Obviously the same person wrote them to Randall and to me. I want to know who that person is. Will you help me?"

Carefully I touched the lump on my head. It seemed to be slightly larger, but the pain was a little less. "I'll be glad to do what I can," I told her. "Two birds, you know."

"Good." She smiled, and moved a little closer to me. She certainly used nice perfume. "I'm going to join my husband now. If we should meet later here, pretend that you do not know me. This is a strictly private arrangement between us. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you have any ideas? Anything might help. For instance, how did he or she find out that I was working for Maybrock?"

She shrugged her firm round shoulders. "I don't know. Perhaps Randall let it slip out that he'd hired you; he talks too much when he's drinking. And he drinks most of the time. It appears to me that the guilty person is trying to scare you off. That's logical, isn't it?"

"No," I said, "but it's as logical as anything I can figure out. You said Maybrock was just a friend. Does he feel that about you?"

"Randall is emotional," she said coldly. "But to me he's just a friend. That's all." She turned and moved to the door and I gazed at her tall figure in admiration. Before she stepped out into the hall she turned and gave me a slow smile. "Do we understand each other, Mr. Bennett?"

I nodded silently.

"Good night." The door closed softly.

I went into the bathroom and soaked my head in cold water. When I came out, Paula Sawyer was standing just inside the door. "Hi," I said, wiping my face with a towel.

She smiled a little uncertainly. "I – I knocked, but I guess you didn't hear me, and I just walked in. I wanted to ask you about Randall. Is – is he all right?"

"Sleeping like a baby. I figure he'll come to life about tomorrow noon. He won't feel very good, but it'll be nothing that a couple of drinks won't cure."

"Do you know something?" she asked. "Randall is a grade-A stinker. There's a dance here tonight, and I brought a new dress."

"You've still got me. I can't dance, but I'll walk you around so that you can show off your dress."

She laughed. "It's a deal—for tonight. But I see now that I'll have to reform Randall. When we're married, I'll make him mend his wayward ways. I love him very much, but sometimes he's like a – a little boy. He needs someone to take care of him."

I thought, *You said it, honey. Someone with a lot of money. Someone like Julia Wilson.* I said curiously, "How did you meet him, anyhow?"

She took a cigarette from a package of mine on the dresser, and I struck a match for her. She blew smoke at the ceiling. "Oh, it was very romantic. Randall's car overturned on the highway close to Akron, and they brought him to the hospital where I work. They assigned me to his room. He wasn't hurt very badly, and he was discharged in a couple of days, but—"

"A couple of days was long enough," I

broke in, "for you to fall in love with him?"

She nodded. "He came to see me after that, and we had a lot of fun. Then he asked me to marry him, and I said I would I I cried when he asked me I was so afraid that he wouldn't. I know he drinks too much, and he has some queer, twisted ideas, but he's really wonderful, Jim. I'd do anything for him—if it was what he wanted "

"Anything?" I asked, grinning.

HER small chin came up. "Yes, anything. If it would help him, I'd do it. That's how I I feel about him They say that in every girl's life there is really only one man Randall is that man for me." She tried to smile at me, but I saw the glint of tears in her blue eyes "Do I sound like the suffering heroine of a soap opera?"

"No," I said soberly.

"I mean it, really. If Randall wanted something, and I could help him get it, I'd get it for him even if it meant that I'd never see him again. That's how I feel about him " She turned abruptly away, and crushed out her cigarette in an ash tray on the telephone table. Her small square shoulders were trembling slightly.

"Tonight he introduced me to Mrs. Wilson, and her husband." She spoke without looking at me "When I saw him last in Akron, he had been drinking a lot, and he mumbled her name Julia. Is he in love with her?"

Her question hung in the silent room, and I tried to speak, but no sound came out I tried again "She's just a friend of his," I said

"He he's in love with her," she said in a choked voice. "I know it. I felt it . . . when he introduced us. That's why he's been acting so queerly. Restless. He didn't want to tell me, to—to hurt me. I love him, but if he wants to marry her—"

"He can't," I said harshly. "She's married That's no way for a girl to talk. To hell with Randall Maybrock " I stepped forward, grasped her shoulders, and turned her until she faced me. There were tears on her cheeks, and her lowered lashes were wet.

I shook her a little.

"Now, listen to me It's fine to be nuts about a guy, but there's a limit. Start thinking of yourself for a change. Find yourself a nice young interne in that hospital Marry him Randall Maybrock would never be any good for you, believe me. Besides, he can't support you He's frittered away his money, and I doubt if he has the ability to dig a decent ditch."

She looked up at me quickly. "Lost his money?" she asked wonderingly. "Now I know what's been worrying him. Poor, poor Randall That's horrible He—he can't live without money. He's always had it, and now, not to have it. Is—is Mrs Wilson rich?"

"Very," I said "But, unfortunately, she has a husband."

Suddenly she smiled. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I—I didn't know. Now I understand. I understand very well." Her eyes were shining.

I had a vague uneasy feeling. "Go put on that new dress," I told her. "I'll knock on your door in ten minutes."

She reached up, pulled my head down, and kissed me quickly and lightly. "For being so nice," she breathed, and she went out swiftly, leaving the door ajar.

I closed the door, stretched out in a chair, and lit a cigarette My head still hurt but the pain was now reduced to a dull throbbing In ten minutes I got up, turned out the lights, and went out. I turned the knob, to make sure that the door had locked automatically when I had closed it.

Then I remembered that I didn't know Paula Sawyer's room number. Luckily, my room key was in my pocket, and I un-

locked my door and went back in I called the desk, got her room number, and went out once more, slamming my door behind me

She was waiting for me in a sand-colored strapless evening gown With her smooth bare shoulders her bright tanny hair and her brown eyes, she was a sight to long remember She took my arm gaily, and we walked down the corridor to the lobby.

I enjoyed myself at the dance But with Paula Sawyer I would have enjoyed myself anywhere She treated me like a high school senior at the graduation prom with her steady boy friend I even danced a couple of waltzes. The rest of the time we sat and talked and had a few drinks Around midnight Julia Wilson and her husband came over to our table and Paula introduced me.

I nodded dead pan at Julia, and shook hands with Jackson Wilson He was cheerful and pleasant, and bought a round of drinks. He held his wife's hand, and several times he whispered in her ear, and they both laughed softly Once, Julia Wilson asked Paula, "Where's Randall, darling?" and I said quickly, "Oh, he's around," before Paula could answer her.

A tall gray-haired man came up to the table, and said to Wilson, "Jack, may I dance with your charming wife?"

Wilson grinned up at him "Thanks, George My feet are killing me."

The gray haired man smiled and danced away with Julia. Jackson Wilson looked at me. "Bennett," he said, "if you aren't going to dance with this lovely creature, I would like the privilege '

Paula Sawyer aughed. "Your feet are killing you, Mr Wilson '

He grinned "That's just what I say in front of my wife I'm rarin' to go " We stood up, and I held Paula Sawyer's chair She winked at me over Wilson's shoulder as they danced slowly out onto the floor. I winked back, and suddenly she averted her gaze and quickly turned her head

Before I sat down again, I glanced toward the wide archway leading into the ball room Randall Maybrock stood there, swaying on his feet I walked swiftly to him grasped his arm, and led him out across the lobby

"What's idea?" he protested thickly "Wanna drink "

"Forget it," I said, "Your gal friend's in there." I guided him to the corridor leading back to the rooms

He brushed my hand away, and leaned against the wall "What gal friend?"

"Paula Sawyer Remember her?"

He stared at me stupidly, and then pulled a hand down over his face He needed a shave, and his shirt was half unbuttoned "Paula," he mumbled. "Nice lil' gal Gonna marry her. Wanna see her." He tried to push past me.

I placed a firm hand on his chest. "Not tonight Go on back to your room and sleep it off "

He lurched back against the wall, and sighed heavily. "Guess you're right Pretty drunk Awful damn drunk But gotta be a gentleman." He placed a wavering finger before his lips "Shush. Don't tell Paula I'm drunk Nice girl, Paula Too damn nice And I'm damn drunk " He began to fumble in his pockets "Got room key someplace "

I waited, watching him, and I tried to keep one eye on the entrance to the ball room

RANDALL went through his pockets, one by one; shirt, jacket, trousers. "Guess left key in room," he muttered. "Slammed door when came out Locked Can't get back in without key. Hell of a note." He looked up, and gave me a loose grin. "No key. Locked out of room " He lurched away. "May as well have a drink "

I grabbed his arm, and pulled him back I pushed him against the wall. "Stay here.

I'll get you a key from the desk clerk."

He stood still, shuffling his feet, and gazed blearily up and down the corridor. I walked swiftly across the lobby to the desk. The genial clerk in the red-checkered shirt was no longer genial. He was sleepy, and he looked at me with a bored expression.

"Long day?" I asked him.

"Working two shifts. Night clerk didn't show up." He yawned.

"Mr. Maybrock left his key in his room," I said. "Will you give me another? Room number 19."

He yawned again, reached behind him, took a key from a peg and tossed it on the desk. I picked it up, said, "Thanks," and went back to Randall Maybrock. He appeared to be asleep on his feet. "Here's a duplicate key," I told him. "Go on back to your room and go to bed."

"Huh?" He aroused himself. "Key? Thanks, Bennett. Tell Paula see her in morning. Tell her sorry."

"Sure," I said, and I pushed him gently along the hall. He shuffled away obediently, the key dangling by its tag from his hand. He turned the corner, and presently I heard his door slam. I breathed a sigh of relief, and looked at my wrist watch. Ten minutes after one in the morning. I went back out to the big lobby.

The music had stopped, and people were swarming out of the ball room. Apparently, the dance was over. I spotted Julia Wilson standing alone in the eddying crowd, and I went over to her. She looked at me enquiringly. Her bare shoulders gleamed softly, and her large dark eyes held a bright glitter of excitement.

"Randall woke up," I told her, "but I talked him into going back to bed."

"Poor Randall," she sighed. "And I feel so sorry for Paula. She's such a sweet girl."

I glanced at her quickly, but she averted her gaze and looked beyond me. "Oh, here they are," she said.

I turned. Paula Sawyer and Jackson Wilson were moving toward us, arm in arm. Wilson had a long slim cigar between his teeth. He grinned at his wife, and nodded to me. "Hi, you two. Party's over." He took the cigar from his mouth, leaned down and kissed his wife. "Good night, honey. I'm going to take a little walk before I turn in."

"I'll go with you," Julia Wilson said.

He shook his head. "You'd better get some sleep. You've got a date with a palomino in the morning. Remember?" He patted her bare shoulder.

She smiled. "I guess you're right, Jack. I'll leave the door unlocked for you."

"I won't be long." He smiled at Paula Sawyer. "Thanks for the dance, honey." He nodded at me, and strode away, trailing rich cigar smoke. I watched him cross the wide verandah, and go down the steps, a tall broad figure in a white dinner jacket.

Paula Sawyer said, "Me for bed. Good night, Jim."

She looked tired, and there were faint blue shadows beneath her eyes. Julia Wilson took her arm. "Come on, darling." They both smiled at me, and then walked down the corridor side by side.

Two girls, both beautiful. One blonde, one dark. One rich, one poor. One married, one single. A study in feminine opposites. And one—maybe both—yearning to marry a no-good drunk named Randall Maybrock. I sighed, and went outside.

Jackson Wilson was not in sight. I had been hoping for a chance to talk to him alone. I didn't know exactly what I'd say to him, but I wanted to talk to him, about anything. I was supposed to be doing a job for a client—two clients—and doing a job meant a lot of things.

Part of a job was talking to people, asking casual questions, watching for expres-

sions and moods, listening to the inflection of a word the tone of a voice Sometimes they added up sometimes they didn't Still, I wanted to talk to Jackson Wilson.

I walked away from the lights and the noise of the Western Lodge and moved in the moonlight across the broad lawn toward the corral . . A soft voice spoke from the shadows "Evenin', pardner."

And that is when I met Jeff Cantrell, and when we heard the gun shot, and when we found the dead body of Jackson Wilson on the path.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Shock of His Life

I PUSHED past Cantrell, knelt beside the still form of Jackson Wilson, and placed my fingers against his throat. The pulse was gone A minute before he had been alive, strolling serenely along a path in the moonlight, smoking a cigar Now he was dead shot in the back I shivered a little.

Then I saw a slip of white paper between his dead fingers. I looked up quickly. Jeff Cantrell had disappeared. I took the paper from Wilson s fingers, unfolded it A small white piece of paper containing two typewritten lines The type blurred in the moonlight, and I struck a match. The words jumped up at me.

Wilson: Be on the path south of the corral at 1:30 This is important—if you want to know what your wife is doing while you are away.

I heard a step on the path, tucked the note into my shirt pocket. Jeff Cantrell approached swiftly, and I saw the bright gleam of the big 44 in his hand.

"Made a quick circle," he panted. "Didn t see nobody. Got the .44 on my way back This is bad, pardner."

"Yeah," I said, and I stood up. "Stay here with him while I call the sheriff"

I hurried back across the moonlit lawn and entered the lodge The lobby was almost deserted The clerk in the red-checkered shirt was dozing at his desk I spotted a telephone booth in a far corner, and I moved toward it

A voice behind me said, "Mr Bennett"

I turned Julia Wilson stood at the entrance to the wide corridor leading to the rooms She was still wearing the black evening dress and she was smoking a cigarette She moved up to me. "Have you seen my husband?"

"No," I lied

She sighed, and her full red mouth took on a sullen expression. "I decided I wanted a nightcap and I don't like to go into the bar alone" She took a long pull on the cigarette and regarded me coolly through the smoke I couldn't mistake the invitation in her voice, and in her eyes.

I said carefully, "I have to make a phone call."

She raised her brows "At this time of the morning?"

"Yes ' I started to move away.

"Don't you *want* to have a nightcap with me, Mr Bennett?" There was a trace of annoyance, of anger, in her voice.

"I'd like to very much," I said, "but this call is rather important." I didn't want to tell her that her husband was dead Not just yet

She gazed at me thoughtfully. "You're very stubborn."

"That's what folks say," I said "Excuse me, please." I turned away quickly, crossed the lobby, and entered the phone booth

I asked the operator to get me the county sheriff's office. While I waited, I tried to remember the sheriff's name, but I couldn t. A sleepy deputy answered, and I told him quickly what had happened, gave him my name, and asked him to get the sheriff out of bed and come out.

The deputy got excited, and started to ask questions, but I hung up on him.

I left the booth, and gazed quickly around the lobby. I didn't see Julia Wilson, and I guessed that she had either returned to her room, or had gone to the bar by herself, after all. I didn't look in the bar to see, but went down the corridor to my room. I got the little .25 automatic from my bag, dropped it into my coat pocket, and stepped out into the corridor.

Swiftly I moved down to Paula Sawyer's room, and knocked gently on the door. It opened immediately. She gazed at me with big questioning eyes. Her small face held a clean scrubbed look, and her yellow hair was braided into long pigtails. She was wearing pale blue silk pajamas, and they clung softly to her little rounded figure.

I said, "Asleep?"

She shook her head. "Reading."

"May I come in a minute?"

She hesitated for just an instant. Then she smiled. "Of course, Jim."

I stepped inside, quietly closed the door behind me. "I need your help," I said. "This is rough. Somebody just shot Jackson Wilson. He's dead."

Her blue eyes got bigger. "D-dead?"

"Yes. I've got to tell Mrs. Wilson, and I want you to come with me, and stay with her. I've called the sheriff."

"B-but . . ." Her small body shivered, and she took a deep breath. Then she said quietly, "Of course, Jim."

I patted her arm. "Good girl."

Swiftly she took a dark blue flannel robe from a closet. As she tied the belt around her slender waist, she asked, "Where is she?"

"In her room—I think. Come on." She followed me down the corridor and around a corner to the wing in which the Wilson's suite was located. The door was standing open about two inches, and there was a light inside. I knocked softly.

From inside Julia Wilson laughed. "Jack, you fool. Come on in."

I pushed the door open.

She was sitting before a dressing table combing her long black hair. Her dark eyes met mine in the mirror, and she turned swiftly. "Oh, it's you," she said coolly. "I'm afraid you're too late for that nightcap." Julia had removed the black evening gown, and now wore a foamy pink negligee which subtly revealed her figure. Then she saw the small form of Paula Sawyer standing behind me. "Oh, hello, darling. Come on in—you two. Jack's is still out taking a walk."

"Look," I began, "I—"

Paula touched my arm, and took over. "Mrs. Wilson," she said quietly, "we have bad news for you. Your husband has been shot—killed."

Julia Wilson stared blankly. "I—I

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don't understand . . ." she stammered

Paula's lips began to tremble, and there were tears in her eyes She shot a helpless glance at me

I took a deep breath "It's true," I said gently. "Your husband is dead Somebody shot him out by the corral. The sheriff will be here shortly "

I wasn't prepared for what happened next Julia Wilson, her face contorted, jumped to her feet, and ran for the door. "I want to see him!" she screamed "Jack, Jack!"

I grabbed her around the waist, and I pulled her back She struggled violently, and her slender body writhed in my grasp Suddenly she went limp and sagged in my arms I carried her to the bed, and laid her down

"Shock," Paula said "I've got a hypo in the kit in my bag I'll get it." She went out swiftly

I stood by the bed. Julia Wilson's eyes were closed, and she whimpered like a lost puppy. In a few seconds Paula came back, carrying a small pigskin bag She brushed me aside. "I'll take care of her," she said crisply.

I moved to the door "I've got to leave for a little while Should I call a doctor?"

Without turning, she shook her head, and her blonde pigtails did a dance "No. She'll be all right " I saw her expertly fill the hypodermic needle, and hold it up to the light She couldn't be bothered with me She was busy with her professional duties I went out and closed the door

FOR a short space of time I stood in the corridor It was a good ten miles to the sheriff's office, and I knew that it would be a little while before he arrived I decided to go back out and help Jeff Cantrell keep his death vigil

As I passed room number 19, I thought of Randall Maybrock, and I paused before his door I thought surely that he would be interested in the fact of the death of Jackson Wilson, and I tried the knob The door swung open Apparently Maybrock hadn't locked it from the inside after he'd entered with the key I'd gotten for him from the clerk I stepped inside A dim lamp burned on a table in a corner.

Maybrock lay on the bed like a dead man The windows were shut, and the room reeked of cigarette smoke and whiskey fumes On the floor beside the bed a bottle lay on its side, empty, and a cigarette had burned itself out in the thick rug Maybrock was fully dressed, the way I'd last seen him in the lobby, before I had sent him back to his room

He lay so still I was reminded of the dead body of Jackson Wilson, and a slight chill went up my spine I moved quickly to the bed and leaned down Maybrock was breathing, and I sighed faintly. I don't know what I had expected, and I decided I was getting jittery. I shook him gently by the shoulder He didn't move I shook him harder, and said sharply, "Hey!"

He opened his eyes, and stared up at me stupidly

"Wake up " I shook him some more.

He tried to brush my hand away "Go 'way," he mumbled

"Listen," I said, "Jackson Wilson has been shot dead The sheriff will be here any minute, and he'll question everybody in the place Get yourself in shape."

"Go 'way," he said again "Wanna sleep "

"Sleep, then," I muttered, and I started for the door Jeff Cantrell would be wondering what had happened to me

Maybrock's thick voice stopped me "Who dead?"

I turned impatiently. "I told you. Jackson Wilson I was just tipping you off before the law gets here, but to hell with you Sleep it off "

He sat up on the bed and rubbed his

eyes, "Aw, don't get sore I know I shouldn't have gotten so drunk, but I've been so worried lately, and . . ." He paused, and looked at me with red-rimmed eyes "Is Wilson dead? Honest?"

I nodded silently

His big body shivered He reached down, picked up the empty whiskey bottle and stared at it sadly He said, "Who killed him?"

"I don't know He was shot in the back as he walked around the corral."

He said in a low voice, "How—how's Julia taking it?"

"Pretty hard."

He sighed heavily. "You gotta drink in your room?"

"No"

He rubbed the back of a hand over his mouth, and he didn't say anything.

I heard a drawling voice in the corridor. "Feller said his name was Bennett This here his room?"

I opened the door A tall brown-faced man with a pipe in his mouth and wearing a khaki shirt, a battered gray felt hat, and corduroy trousers was standing across the corridor before the door to my room. The clerk in the red-checkered shirt, no longer looking sleepy, stood beside him.

"Here, Sheriff," I said.

He turned "You Bennett?"

I nodded. "I called your office. I'll take you to the body."

He shook his head "Never mind, son That cowboy feller already showed us. He saw us pull up outside, and he came over I rounded up three deputies for this job I got two of 'em watching the doors of this place, and one out with the body, Doc Konkle—he's the coroner—it's on his way. Wilson was a pretty big man in these parts Where's his wife?"

I nodded down the corridor, "In her rooms. A friend is with her"

He nodded, and puffed on his pipe. "Bennett," he said thoughtfully. "Outta Cleveland?"

I nodded

"Heard of you"

I smiled "Can I help you, Sheriff?"

"You sure can This here is a big job. I don't know how you city fellers do it, but I aim to question everybody in the place" He peered past me into Maybrock's room. "Who's that feller?"

"Randall Maybrock"

"Heard of him, too," he said shortly. "Boozed up?"

"He was. Just a hangover now."

"Might as well start on him." He stepped past me into the room, and spoke to Maybrock "I'm Sam Yost, sheriff of this county. I guess you know what happened I've got to ask a few questions. Mr Wilson was killed at one-thirty—according to that cowboy feller How long you been here in your room?"

Maybrock looked bewildered "I—I don't know." He looked at me helplessly. "Do you know, Bennett? I—I was pretty drunk"

I said to the sheriff, "Mr Maybrock went to his room a few minutes after one o'clock A little while ago, when I came in, he was sleeping on his bed."

"That don't prove nothing," the sheriff answered shortly. "He coulda left his room."

"And killed Wilson?" I said "Try again, Sheriff I'm afraid Mr Maybrock's aim wouldn't have been very good. I'll vouch for his whereabouts at the time Mr. Wilson was killed."

Randall Maybrock was staring at us dumbly, and I began to feel a little sorry for him After all, he was a client.

"All right, son," the sheriff said to me. "Just routine No offense" He stepped into the corridor "Stick around I'll be back." To the waiting clerk, he said, "Take me to Mrs Wilson's room."

I thought of Julia Wilson, and of Paula Sawyer, and wondered if I should go with the sheriff. I placed a cigarette in my mouth, trying to decide what to do. I

found I didn't have a match, and I spotted a booklet on the dresser. I moved across the room, picked up the matches. As I did so, my gaze fell on a flat key with a brass disc attached bearing the room number Sixteen. I struck a match and stared at the disc. The match burned my fingers, and I dropped it into an ash tray.

Randall Maybrock said in a complaining voice, "What was that old gaffer getting at, Bennett? You know I was in my room at one-thirty is that when he said Wilson was shot? I remember now. I'd locked myself out, and you got me another key from the desk clerk"

I PICKED up the key from the dresser and held it up by the brass tag. "This key?" I asked him. "Is this the key you used to get back into your room?"

He looked puzzled. "Of course. You ought to know, Bennett. You got it for me. I used it to unlock my door, and then I hit the bed, and I didn't know anything until you woke me up"

I shook my head slowly. "You didn't use this key," I said gently, and I held up the brass disc with the number on it for him to see. "This is the key the clerk gave me, but it isn't the key to your room The clerk was sleepy, and he grabbed the wrong one. Your room number is 19. This is a key to room number 16. It never unlocked *your* door."

He stared at me in bewilderment. "I —I don't understand It was the key I used"

I moved to the door, and inserted the key in the lock It went in about half way. I coudn't push it any further, and it wouldn't turn. I said to Maybrock, "You tried to plant an alibi by pretending to be drunker than you were, and by going through that I-forgot my-key act to establish the time you returned to your room. But you had written Jackson Wilson a note, and you had murder on your mind.

"You can see the corral from your window When he walked out to keep the note rendezvous, you sneaked out the door at the end of the corridor, followed him, and shot him in the back Then you returned here, flopped on the bed and stayed there, pretending to be dead drunk and still sleeping it off."

He shook his head slowly, a look of incredulity on his face "That's fantastic, Bennett," he said quietly. "I never left this room —and it was *your* idea to get the key for me"

"Sure," I said, "but if I hadn't volunteered, you would have gotten it from the clerk—and then *he* would have been your alibi. It might have worked, too, either way—if the clerk had given out the right key. Nobody would have known that you had your original key with you, and used it to get back into your room

Maybe you didn't even lock your door when you went out. I don't know. All I know is that you didn't re enter your room with this key, as you say you did. To make your alibi good you should have checked the number on the tag. You—"

"No," he almost shouted at me. "You are all wrong. I—"

"Shut up," I broke in. "This deal with you was phony from the first. You killed Jackson Wilson—for a couple of reasons. You're in love with his wife, and you're broke. Wilson stood in your way. With Wilson dead, his wife would get all his money, and you figured that you and Julia could live happily ever after. Only Julia didn't count on murder. That was your idea.

"So you rigged up an alibi for yourself. That note you showed me yesterday was a fake. You wrote it to yourself, to throw suspicion off yourself, to make me think somebody was gunning for you You even wrote a note to Julia Wilson, too—to make it look better after you told her about the threat you had received.

"And you followed me last night and

shot a slug into my car, to make me think that it tied in with the shot fired at you. You shot that hole in your car yourself. And you sent a note to Jackson Wilson, hoping that it would be found after you killed him. It would strengthen your alibi, you thought, and give the impression that some unknown killer had threatened the three of you—yourself, Julia Wilson and her husband.

"You attempted a nice build up, but it didn't jell." I held up the key. "This fried your goose. I'm turning you over to the sheriff. The charge—and I'll back it up in court—is the premeditated murder of Jackson Wilson."

His face was red, and he appeared to be having trouble breathing. "No. I didn't—"

"Let's get this over with," I broke in harshly. "Where's the gun you used on Jackson Wilson?"

He moved swifter than I had expected, and he caught me flat-footed. His hand snaked beneath the pillow, and came out with a blue steel revolver. "Here is the gun," he said softly. "The gun I used on Wilson. Stand away from the door, Bennett. No hick sheriff is going to arrest me for anything. I'm walking out of here, and you're not going to stop me."

I had expected him to argue and protest, but he had surprised me. My little .25 automatic was resting snugly in my inside coat pocket, but with Maybrock's gun leveled at my stomach I knew I'd never have time for a draw. I kept an eye on his gun, and when I spoke I tried to keep my voice steady.

"You'll never make it," I said.

He got slowly to his feet and stood facing me. The gun in his hand never wavered. "Step aside," he said softly. "In Ohio it's the chair, and they can only burn me once. I'll shoot you like I did Jackson. I hated him. He was Julia's husband, and that's plenty of reason to hate him."

Watching him carefully, I said, "When you went broke, you forgot about Paula Sawyer. She didn't have any money. So you concentrated on Julia. But why did you ask Paula up here? As a cover up for your motives? To gain sympathy? As part of your fake build up?"

"Of course," he sneered. "Why else?" He waved the gun. "Move aside."

"No," I said.

He steadied the gun, and I saw the sweat on his face. "After you kill once, it's easier the second time." His voice was almost a whisper. "If I've got to kill you now to get out of here, I'll kill you. It won't bother me a bit."

I stared at the death in his hand, and my knees began to tremble. He was too far away for me to make a dive for him, and I probably couldn't have reached him anyhow. The gun was leveled point blank. He couldn't miss. There was a desperate, wild look in his eyes. He'd made the decision to shoot, and I saw his finger tighten over the trigger.

There came a gentle rapping at the door.

Maybrock's eyes filled with sudden terror, but his gaze never left my face. There was an instant's silence, and I took a long, long chance.

"Come in," I yelled loudly.

Maybrock crouched, and swung toward the door as it opened. He had waited an instant too long. Now there were two of us, and he backed away, undecided.

Jeff Cantrell said, "Pardner—" He stopped, his cool eyes on the gun in Maybrock's hand.

"Close the door," Maybrock choked out.

"Why, sure," Cantrell said easily. With the heel of one boot he kicked the door shut. I saw that his bone handled .44 was tucked beneath the waistband of his trousers. He smiled at me.

"Take it easy, pardner. That dude clerk told me you were in this room.

Good thing I stopped by. We'll handle this hombre What's ailing him? Liquor loco?"

"He killed Jackson Wilson," I said My voice was a croak in my throat "He was fixing to kill me He wants to try a get-away"

"Well, well." Cantrell gazed at Maybrock with an amused expression "Put up that gun son," he said pleasantly

Maybrock's big body began to tremble, and his lips twitched Abruptly he lost all control "Die, damn you!" he screamed, and his gun swung on Cantrell

Reflex action caused me to duck and dive for the cover of a chair Even as I lunged forward, I saw Cantrell's hand slap his waistband lightly, and the long-barreled 44 jumped clear, booming flame. I never heard Maybrock's gun—I don't think he had time to fire

All I know is that the room rocked with the hammering blast of the big 44. Maybrock's body seemed to leap backwards, his right arm dangling like a broken branch. His gun thudded to the floor, and he crashed into the bed

Jeff Cantrell stood still, a faint smile on his leathery face, his eyes bright and alert. Blue smoke curled from his gun.

I stood up straight, and wiped the sweat from my face. "Thanks," I breathed. "That sure was a fast draw."

"Hell, it was slow," Cantrell said carelessly. With a tied down holster it's a heap faster." He grinned at me. "But I figured it'd be fast enough for a dude." He blew into the muzzle of the gun. "Want me to fetch the sheriff pardner?"

I heard a shout outside in the corridor. "He's coming," I said

Randall Maybrock was slumped on his knees by the bed Just above his right elbow I saw a neat hole in his coat It was already oozing a little blood Cantrell's bullet had struck him exactly in the center of his arm I said to Cantrell, "We'll skip that can shooting date in the morning I know you can do it."

The door opened, and Sheriff Sam Yost stepped quickly into the room "I heard a shot—"

Randall Maybrock stared at the three of us wildly.

* * *

I never collected any fee from Randall Maybrock He died in the electric chair at Columbus for the murder of Jackson Wilson But I did collect from Julia Wilson She wore attractive black mourning clothes for the customary year, and then she married a young tennis player from New Jersey.

Jeff Cantrell still works for the Western Lodge, and in the fall we go pheasant hunting together. Paula Sawyer married a young pediatrician from Youngstown. The last I heard they had three kids. I never met Mildred, the Wilson's maid, at the beer joint. Maybe she married Chester I don't know.

THE END

CRIME QUIRKS

One convict earned $11,000 in Hammond, Ind., prison in a year drawing cartoons more money than he had made while staging holdups.

◆ ◆ ◆

Salt Lake City's Park Commissioner, Fred Tedesco, reported to police that two hundred and twenty five square feet of lawn in Fairmont Park had disappeared.

It apparently was a very honest person with a very compelling sweet tooth who broke into the neat candy store of a woman near Hamilton Field, Cal She came to work one morning to find a broken window and two bars of candy missing but by the candy case was a five-dollar bill.

H. H.

HOMICIDAL HOBBY

By RUFUS BAKALOR

One little tap would have been enough. . . .

Everything was a joke to traveling salesman Cabat . . . until he met the hick with a treasure— and sold himself short.

WHEN I pulled out of Escanaba early this morning, I planned to spend the night at the Nicolet Hotel in Green Bay, Wisconsin. And here I am. Only, I had thought I would be down in one of the sample rooms kibitzing at the pinochle game, or maybe having a few short, sociable ones with the boys at the bar. But, instead, I am sitting in my hungry hotel room writing a story on the cheap stationery they provide in this firetrap.

Dick C. Cabat is my name, and I am a traveling salesman by profession. Perhaps I should be traveling right at this moment, traveling like crazy.

But somehow, I feel that I have to write down, as well as I can remember it, all that happened today between me and a Mr. Gillespie. And I will say, by way of

introduction, that I wish to the patron saint of traveling men that this was not a true story and that I had never heard of this Mr Gillespie or the town of Thebes, Wisconsin

I started out today, giving myself a pretty good piece of territory to cover Well, you know how it is on the road. Some days you get the breaks and some days, no The buyer you want to see may be out or his ulcer may be troubling him or you've got to wait around and wait around That's the bad part about being a traveling man

But this day I mean today, so many crazy things have happened in this one today that I keep thinking they all happened a long, long time ago—I got the breaks, all right Everyone I wanted to see was in, and they all went for the Plastifabco products in a big way. I made better time than I'd expected to, and I had a pocketful of orders, away over the mark I'd set for myself

Now, when it's getting on to late afternoon, and the road is clear, and you've made all your calls, and got a stack of orders from rated accounts to show for it, that's a mighty good feeling, like a kid taking his first sprint in a new pair of tennies You drive along fast, singing at the top of your voice

That's the way I felt. I know a lot of traveling men who make their quota and then drive along figuring up their commissions in their heads, and thinking of where they can go to sell some more But, not me I have always contended that if you can't have some fun traveling, then get off the road and go get a job in a canning factory.

So there I was, barreling it for Green Bay, maybe 70, 80 miles away. When you drive along the highway, do you ever wonder where those little county trunks lead to? That's the way with me. I like a lot of laughs, but there's a little of the philosopher in me too

Well, I came to this sign saying, *"County Trunk BB. Thebes, 7 mi."* So I turned off the highway toward Thebes, wherever the hell that is.

Don't ask me why. I've done that kind of thing before Impulse, I guess. Or maybe the philosopher in me. Or maybe every salesman has an idea he's going to stumble on an A#1 account in some out of the way place, that no one's ever called on before

Anyway, there I was in Thebes. And, take it from me, Thebes has seen better days, much better days There are a lot of towns like it that are in what used to be the logging country; boom towns once, but just gasping now

You know what I mean: most of the windows broken or boarded up, everything tumbledown, weeds in the cracks of the sidewalks. Well, Thebes was typical of these towns; except that in most of them there are some slight signs of life, but there didn't seem to be any in Thebes.

I should have turned my car around and blown out of there But, no I saw a general store with the name "Peters & Gillespie" printed in fancy script on the windows I pulled up in front of it, mounted the stairs that led to the store porch wouldn't you know it had a porch? and walked in.

This store was a laugh It smelled like a spice cabinet, only mustier. The stock was right out of 1910, right down to the high button shoes and buggy whips. Peters & Gillespie had everything but a clientele these big, fancy thread cabinets, hand coffee grinders, peavies, lumberman's boots, fedora hats, and what have you. Even spats

I thought, wait until I run into some young punk just starting out on the road. "Hey, you ever called on Peters & Gillespie up in Thebes? No? Well, you're missing a good bet: they're big users"

Picture a plastic apron salesman in a forsaken place like that But there I was,

Dick C. Cabat, the fun-loving philosopher.

I DIDN'T hear anyone come in, so I got a little shock when a crackly voice peeped up "What can I do for you, sir?" I turned before he had finished and, if I hadn't seen the words coming out of his mouth, I'd have sworn it was one of these wax statues.

"Mr Peters?"

"Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Peters is dead," the old gent said He was scrawny and fragile-looking, without any teeth and, wouldn't you know, he was wearing a wing collar and one of those shiny black coats, among other antiques

I am one for kidding around a little, and the whole atmosphere in the place was so ominous, so I handed him one of my calling cards, and said, "My card, sir" as if I was challenging him to a duel

The old man took my card and, holding it at arm s length in front of him, said, "Mr Dick C. Cabat, is it?"

"The very same, sir," I said, and I felt a little queazy when I took the cold, bony hand he extended to me.

Then he said he didn't think he was in the market to buy anything, but he would look at my line anyway, "out of courtesy."

When I went out to the car to get my sample grip, I should have hopped in and cleared out of there That was the normal thing to do because the old man gave me the creeps, and this had all the earmarks of a sheer waste of time But, no I brought my samples in, and spread them out over some bolts of dusty yard goods.

I guess the old gent, Mr Gillespie, never saw any plastics before because he kept smelling of them, and rubbing them together, and even listening to them I got the feel ng that he was stalling, so I said, "Well, how about it?"

"These are very fascinating products, but I'm afraid they're more in Mr. Peters' province. He generally did the buying in that line He understood materials."

"Oh," I said, "ain't it a shame Mr. Peters ain't here?"

"Mr Peters is dead "

"So you told me once before," I said, starting to put my samples back in the grip "Well, it's been great fun meeting you, Mr. Gillespie Maybe next trip "

"But you're not leaving here already?"

"Oh, to be sure I've got to get back on the road," I said

The old gent put his feeble little hand on my arm and said, "Please don't go, just yet. Stay and join me in a cup of coffee. I beg of you " He was close to tears, I could see.

Then he told me how lonesome it was for him all alone in the store, and practically all alone in the town And how especially anxious he was to chew the fat with a salesman for a spell because in the old days they used to see, as he called us, "commercial travelers" all the time, but hardly ever any more

The long and short of it is: I gave in. When I agreed to have a cup of coffee with him, he was as pleased and fluttery as an umbrella salesman in a wet spell after the drought.

Mr Gillespie lived in rooms above the store and he led me up the stairs to them The living quarters were as old fashioned as the store, but they were neat and cheerful The lampshades had g l a s s-b e a d fringes on them That sort of thing

He put out a couple of cups and poured coffee into them with a shaky hand I tasted mine It was hot, strong, and like nothing I've ever tasted before Must have been brewed while Peters was still alive, I thought, and I let it sit

I lit up a cigarette He lit up a pipe that smelled like old letters in an attic, and we began to talk That is, he began to talk I guess the old gent must have been craving for someone to talk to, because he kept rambling on, without mak ng much sense.

Then he started talking about the "treasure" he laid by in the old days, and I perked up a little

"Oh, things are pretty quiet now," he said, "but this used to be a crackerjack of a stand in days gone by. And I've got the treasure of those fat years stowed away."

"Where? In the Thebes First National?"

"I'm not trusting this treasure to any bank; not after what happened in '93 I keep it in a valise right here, so I can keep an eye on it." He got up and tottered to a closet "Here, I'll show you"

He opened the door and the closet was empty, except for a big leather suitcase

"So that's where the swag is Mr Gillespie Money in there?"

He just said, 'Aha,' teasingly, closed the door, and went back to the table

Then I began figuring in my mind and I broke in on his rambling with, "You must get awful lonesome here, Mr Gillespie. Living here all alone, I mean"

"Well, I wouldn't say that I live here all alone."

"With your memories? All alone with your memories"

"Yes, and with my granddaughter."

I was glad when he said that, because there was a chance then that I could stop thinking what I was thinking But I had to ask, "Where's she now?"

"She teaches school over at Crandon; but she comes in every weekend, to sort of look after me." He pulled an immense watch out of his vest pocket "Jessie'll be here in about an hour and a half She's a fine girl."

He went on about his granddaughter, but my mind was riveted to that suitcase full of money in the closet Now, I am a good, law-abiding citizen but, when some one sets up a perfect deal for you, then that's almost too much to turn your back on An hour and a half, he said That was plenty of time

FIGURING it all out, I didn't see how I could come out the loser The old gent was practically asking me to do him in and make off with his "treasure", as he called it And I didn't have much trouble talking myself into accommodating him

I suddenly got weary of sleeping in crumby hotel rooms and knocking myself out on the road for a few bucks Here were the net profits of a lifetime for ten, maybe fifteen, minutes work

The next part I don't like to tell about. In lots of ways, I have trouble believing that I was the one who did it I remember walking behind him and taking the poker off the stove, and Mr Gillespie droning on like the sawmill he was talking about

Well, one little tap would have been good and enough, what with him being so old and feeble But, no I had to— Well, as I said, that's the part I don't like to tell about Afterwards, I didn't dare look at him any more

After that was done, all I could think of was getting the suitcase and getting out of there as fast as I could But I wasn't taking any chances. I went around and remembered what I'd touched the cup, the chair I'd been sitting in, the stove poker, and all those things.

I wiped them clean of whatever fingerprints may have been on them. I even emptied my cigarette butts into my pocket, and marveled at the time at how thorough I was.

Then I went to the closet and tried to lift the old man's treasure chest. It was so heavy that I could lift it only about an inch off the floor. I got worried about it, and I guess I started to cry But then I found I could drag it So I did. The sweat was dripping off the tip of my nose and I was wondering what would happen first: my back break in two, or my arms come clean out of their sockets

I dragged it to the car, tipped it up on end, and then tipped it into the trunk Once I'd struggled it into the trunk of my

car, I stopped crying, and I didn't care if it was full of gold doubloons or jelly beans, just so I had it.

I ran back into the store, picked up my sample case, took a quick look around, and beat it to the car.

I had only one idea: to get as far away from Thebes as I could, as fast as I could. According to what the old man had said, this granddaughter Jessie was due home in about half an hour now.

So I piled out of there, all tensed up. After a while on the main highway, I began to relax a little and I'd play a little game, looking at the rear view mirror and counting the telephone poles that kept adding up between the old man and me.

After a while it began to rain, and then the rain changed to sleet, and the roads began to take ice. So I had to go slower; but I didn't mind because I was pretty well along now and, if the roads up around Thebes were closed off, I figured, that suited me fine.

Then I got to thinking about that old leather suitcase in my trunk, or rather about the contents of it. I remembered that the old man had never actually said there was money in it and I began to wonder. It worked on me and I had to stop and find out for sure.

I sprung the locks on the old valise with the jack-handle. There was treasure in it, all right. Big rolls of silver dollars and some of twenty-dollar gold pieces—that's what made it so heavy—and neat stacks of the long green, most of them the big size like they used to have. I still don't know if the loot is good or bad for me. It doesn't matter, much.

When I got to Green Bay, I locked the trunk with the suitcase in it, and I parked the car in an All-Night. In the hotel, I asked about the roads and they said that it was impossible to get through.

Well, that is how things stand up to this moment. I have put down everything that happened just as faithfully as I can, considering that I am not a writer, but a traveling man.

I have told what happened to the old man; but what will happen to me now is another question. I suppose that if someone came into this hotel room right now and saw me writing this all out while bawling like a baby and with tears running down my cheeks, why, that would hand them a big laugh. Well, there's a big joke, all right; and it's on me.

I said before, like I was challenging the old gent to a duel. I challenged him and I lost, because now all I can see is one little gesture of Mr. Gillespie, over and over again: reading my calling card and then putting it in the pocket of his shiny black coat. Reading my calling card and then putting it in the pocket of his shiny black coat.

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Rick Lochinvar broke out his tin suit and started dodging hot lead—all because a blonde stowaway wanted to get into San Quentin.

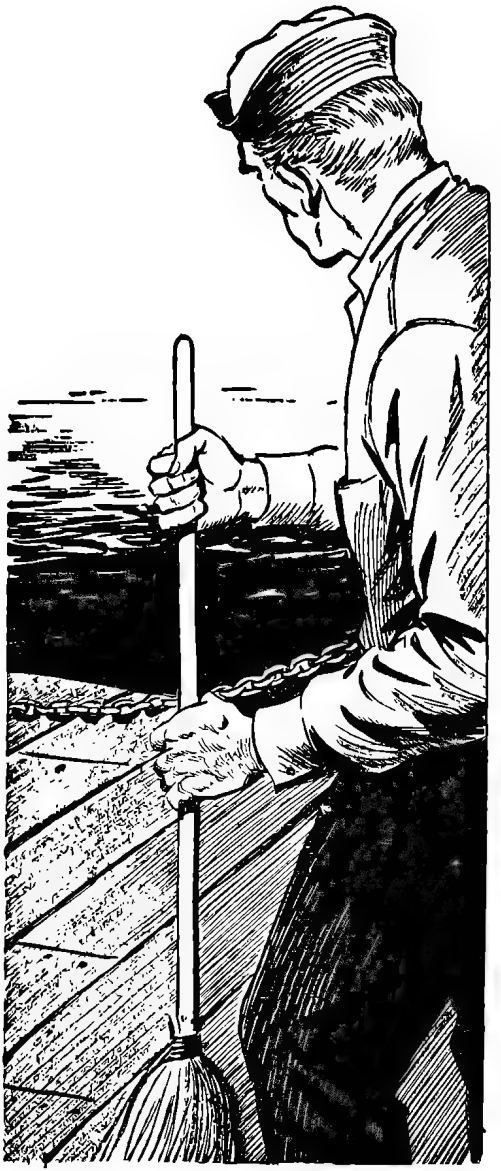
By DONN MULLALLY

He leaped after her, grabbed her arm and hung on.

A BULLET FOR BABY

CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Trouble



RICK CASTRO saw her first when she loped aboard the ferry, *El Prado*, one jump ahead of the Old Man's "Cast Off" whistle. She was young and blonde, and curved where this was a good idea. Her eyes were very large, which made her other features hardly count at all; her nose and mouth, tiny. She was wearing a powder-blue suit and elevated shoes. She looked cold, and a little frightened.

Rick watched the girl disappear up the stairwell in the direction of the coffee shop on the upper deck. He saw Swanson gaping after her too.

"What's that all about?" the Swede deckhand grinned.

Rick Castro shrugged, and got busy with the lines. The ramp was cranked clear of the deck, and the *El Prado* shimmied out of the ferry slip and started on her twenty-three-minute cruise to San Quentin Point.

As soon as he and Swanson had secured that end of the ferry, Nick wandered to the other end and camped at the rail. He had time on his hands to wonder about the girl. There was nothing new or absorbing in the scenery. A high overcast dripped down on San Francisco Bay; the usual sharp, westerly wind kicking up a small chop in the gray water.

Ahead, Mount Tamalpais seemed to be holding its own with the fog, ripping it to let some sunlight through on the northern arm of the Bay, the Marin Islands, the

State prison Back on Point Richmond, the slip they were leaving, fog still hung low enough on the hills to spook up the big, white, oil storage tanks.

Huddled in his old Navy pea coat, Rick could understand the girl looking cold Which was all he understood What was she doing out here, in that outfit, on foot?

This was a car ferry. The Richmond slip was at the end of a long road that wound through a sand-and-gravel pit and the oil refinery. People d dn't just walk out there to go for a boat ride

The slip at San Quentin Point was in the front yard of the prison This wasn't a regular visiting day over there, and if she was going to San Rafael she had a long hike ahead of her to make connection with the bus lines. Those shoes and her hobble skirt would be no help

Of course, if she played her cards right in the coffee shop, she might bum a ride.

Rick was curious enough about how she'd work this out to watch for her when they got in at San Quentin She wasn't in any of the cars that drove off the ferry.

After the last car left, a couple of prison guards with tommy guns came down the stairwell, leading a raggedly organized group of fresh cons up from Los Angeles on the night train. They'd been brought out to the ferry in taxis, had been herded together in the lee of the glass windbreak on the upper deck There were more guards with ready guns

Rick watched them straggle ashore and climb into trucks sent down from the prison These drafts of prisoners from the south always reminded him of his first days in the Navy, being shoved around boot camp by a Tunney-fish petty officer He didn't think the cons looked any more beat or bewildered than those raw recruits

The girl was the last one down the stairs She followed the men as far as the rail of the ferry; stopped a few feet from Rick, her eyes and what was in them still walking beside one of those guys.

Rick looked at her, then at the cons. No one seemed to be straining his neck to catch a last look at her No one waved before he climbed into the trucks

The eastbound cars began to funnel into the ferry Rick touched the girl's arm. It felt hard, cold

"I'm sorry, miss" he said "I'll have to ask you to go to the upper deck There are cars coming in here It's dangerous"

The prison trucks were gone Her eyes were fixed on the road where she'd seen them turn out of sight toward the gray buildings

Rick tugged at her arm again, said, "Lady—please!"

She let go of the rail, and her arm was suddenly spongy in Rick's hand She winced as though he were hurting her, pulled away from him and walked stiff-legged to the stairs Rick saw Swanson leering across the ramp at him. Before the girl was out of earshot, Swede said:

"How you doin'? Makin' any time?"

Rick said, "No Want to try your luck?"

Swanson laughed, and they went to work directing cars aboard the ferry so the vessel rode trim in the water. The Old Man sounded off with a warning whistle from the pilot house.

It didn't take Rick the whole return trip to Point Richmond to make up his mind about the girl Her guy had been in that draft of prisoners from L A She'd had to see him once more before he started wearing prison clothes *Love*, he told himself *The big, flaming kind*

Now, she could go home and start sweating out the time *he'd* be doing Or, maybe, she'd find herself a job here so she could run over and see him every visiting day. There were plenty of dames doing just that.

SHE was down, standing as far forward as she could get, ten minutes before they were due in the ferry slip at Rich-

mond. Eastbound, there was only the wind the *El Prado* made at her rugged five knots. Only enough to flutter the girl's blue suit, make her hold onto her straw flowered beanie. She shouldn't have been cold. But she shivered in little spasms.

Rick went to his station at the winch. The tide was giving the Old Man a bad time as he started the approach to the slip. It tried to swing them around for a broadside landing. Rick heard the Old Man ring the engine-room for *Full Astern*, and saw the water boil past the hull. The *El Prado* shuddered, clawing for headway.

Rick glanced at the girl—where she'd been standing. She'd moved, while he was criticizing the skipper's seamanship, had stepped over the chain strung across the car port and was out on the open deck, with nothing between her and the churning water except three feet of planking.

The way she was tensed, almost crouched, Rick knew what was coming next.

He leaped after her, grabbed her arm and hung on. "Lady," he said, "You're breakin' a company rule. You'll have to stay in back of this chain."

She struggled momentarily.

"There's another rule, too," he smiled thinly. "We don't allow people to commit suicide off our front porch."

She stopped fighting, stood where she was, her chin tilted away from him.

"Okay," Rick said, "if that's how it has to be." He picked her up, set her down on his side of the chain. She was off and running toward the stairway, her face hidden from him. He heard Swanson chuckling.

"There's another rule you forgot, Castro. Don't handle the lady customers!"

"It wasn't my idea," snapped Rick.

On his second try, the skipper made a perfect approach. The ramp was cranked down, and cars started bumping onto the pier. Rick waited to see the girl leave.

She didn't.

Swanson cracked, "It looks like we've got a stowaway."

Rick said, "Yeah. Why don't you go

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find her and put her in irons, Swanson?"

Swanson shook his head. "She's your department, Castro. You find her."

He didn't have to. She found him . . . after they were under way again for San Quentin Point She came up behind him. He knew who it was, knew she was there, before she touched his arm, said, "I—I beg your pardon."

Rick was leaning on the rail, trying to work up some interest in a couple of fishing boats off the Marin Islands. He glanced at the girl, growled: "Didn't you get your money's worth on the last trip?"

"I wanted to talk to you," she said, "to thank you."

"Okay," he said "You're welcome" He saw she was pouting. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I spoil the speech you had in mind?"

She smiled a little, bleakly. "As a matter of fact, you did."

Rick turned his back on the rail. "All right," he said. "If you'll feel better, let's hear it."

"It doesn't seem important now," she said, with a vague, fluttery gesture of her hands. "But I do want you to know I am deeply grateful to you for I might have been . . ." She looked at the cold, greenish water slipping past them, shuddered, reached out to steady herself on the rail. Rick saw she was wearing a wedding band and solitaire

He didn t have anything to do for ten minutes, so he said, "Your husband was one of those men we took over to Quentin this morning, wasn't he?"

Her eyes became glazed, at least as far away as the sprawling stone buildings of the prison. "Yes," she said.

"What's he in for, what did he do?"

"He's supposed to have murdered a woman," she replied

"You don t think he did "

She shook her head. "No."

"I understand they don't have anything but innocent men at Quentin," said Rick. "Of course, your husband wouldn't tell you he'd killed this woman, but . . ."

Rick Castro expected the girl to shove off right then However, she was moving her head negatively again "He didn't tell me anything," she said. "He hasn't spoken to me since . . . since he confessed."

RICK swung around on the rail, so he was looking at her levelly. "Your husband confessed, but you believe he's innocent. Aren't you carrying faith a long way?"

"I know he didn't do it," she said, her chin firm.

"What's your husband's name?" asked Rick. "Maybe I read about him in the paper."

"Arthur Lambert." She almost whispered the name.

Rick nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I remember He's the private eye who shot that Hollywood party girl. About a month ago? Wasn't his story, this babe was putting the squeeze on him to leave you—or else?"

She bobbed her head silently.

"And in the meantime," Rick went on, "he hasn't spoken to you?"

"No. Not at all "

"He wouldn't even look at you this morning, right?"

"Yes," she answered "That's right. I . . . I . . ."

"You couldn't take it any more," Rick guessed "So you thought you'd cancel out the whole business with a dive off the ferry. Now you say you want to thank me Why? Did I do you a favor?"

"I believe you did," she said "I . . . I couldn't fight for him very well, could I, if I . . ."

"Look," Rick said. "I'm not trying to talk you into jumping overboard, or anything like that But as long as we're kicking this around, I'm curious You talk about fighting for him What can you do? Lambert confessed shooting this babe."

"I know," she said "But there must be something I can do if only he'd talk to me"

Rick Castro stood up from the rail, said, "Well, kid, I wish you luck It looks like you'll need it."

He started to leave her, but she caught his arm "Please, Mr Mr "

"The name's Castro Rick Castro."

"You—you must know men who work inside the the prison, Mr. Castro."

"Yeah, I know a few," Rick acknowledged "What's on your mind?"

"I just wondered if it would be possible to send a message to my husband I mean, without getting anyone in trouble."

"Sure," smiled Rick. "There's nothing to it You write a letter and mail it to him"

"No I mean, a more personal message. Perhaps someone could tell him . . ."

She dropped her eyes to the purse she'd been mauling nervously. "He sent word by his attorney that I wasn't to try to contact him in any way He wouldn't accept my letters."

"What's going to make him change his mind at this late date, Mrs Lambert?"

"I I don't know." She fumbled at the clasp on her purse, opened it and snatched a small, damp looking handkerchief She dabbed her eyes, started to say something else to Rick; then turned and walked rapidly away from him The last he saw of her was her ankles disappearing up the stairway.

CHAPTER TWO

Overdose of Chivalry

THE *El Prado* was close to the San Quentin side now, making its approach to the slip The gray and green buildings of the penitentiary had taken form, as though they had been shoved up out of the brown hill in back of them

Rick Castro had seen a lot of those buildings. Ordinarily, they didn't mean any more to him than Mount Tamalpais, part of the scenery All they did, now, was keep him from forgetting Mrs. Lambert and her killer husband

Those people didn't figure in his life. Yet, here he was, identifying himself with Mrs Lambert, seeing those stone walls through her eyes Wondering how a message could be passed through them to a man who was probably already in the death house—or on his way there, for sure

Castro beat his fists against the rail, swore at himself What was it with him? Was it this dame's big, blue eyes and blonde hair that made him want to break out the tin suit and white horse? It was a good thing they were in the slip and he had work to do.

Rick was stacking cars as they drove aboard, when he saw Father Hagan's coupe bump down the ramp He coached the Father to a parking place in the starboard tunnel, had a second to speak to him before he had to do anything about the next car.

The priest was a large, florid faced man, thick through the shoulders. Looked more like a football coach than a padre. Rick knew he divided his time between a church in Richmond and the penitentiary, where he was one of the chaplains. He gave the ferry a lot of business.

Rick said, "Good morning, Father. I'd like to talk to you as soon as we're under way"

Father Hagan smiled "Of course, Rick. I'll stay here in the car"

When Rick got the San Quentin end of the ferry secured, he went back to Father Hagan's car The priest was reading a little, thin, black bound book, closed it with a hearty snap as Rick opened the door of the coupe and crawled in.

"All right, Rick, what's on your mind?" asked Father Hagan good naturedly. "Are you coming to Mass, Sunday? Want to

warn me, so I won't faint dead away when I see you?"

"No, Father," grinned Rick sheepishly "Nothing as wild as that There's a girl I think she's probably up in the coffee shop now I'm not giving a pitch for her, Father; but she's in a jam I think you ought to talk to her"

"What kind of a jam, Rick?"

"Her husband was in the draft of prisoners from I A this morning Murder. She rode across in the ferry with him I had to pull her off the rail, coming back She told me a little about it, and I believe maybe you can help her"

"We'll certainly try," Father Hagan said, opening the door of his coupe "Shall we go up? You can introduce me."

They found her in the coffee room, sitting at a table near the window She was riding backwards, so she could see the penitentiary Castro said, "This is Father Hagan Mrs Lambert He's a prison chaplain He can help you, if anybody can"

Rick watched the priest settle his big frame on the chair beside the girl, realized Castro was strictly spare gear. He shuffled, embarrassed; said, "Well, I'll see you folks later," faded back to the coffee shop door. He could see Father Hagan's black clad shoulders hunched forward, his red head bobbing as he talked earnestly with the girl.

"Okay," Rick told himself as he went below. "She's off your neck now. Are you happy?" He would've felt a lot better if the answer had been yes

BY THE time he'd finished his shift on the ferry, Rick Castro was a little beat He had seen Mrs Lambert drive off with Father Hagan They'd both had a smile and a wave for him as the Padre's coupe lurched up the ramp Everything must have looked a lot better to Mrs. Lambert

Rick hoped so. She was overdue a decent break But the balance of his eight hours' toil for the San Rafael Ferry Company dragged like time spent in a dentist's waiting room Only Rick didn't have anything like an extraction or an electric drill to look forward to Just a ride home to his empty apartment

Even if he broke the trip with a stop for a couple of beers at the corner saloon, it was nothing.

All at once, this wasn't the good life He wanted to talk to somebody besides a bartender Somebody who could straighten him out He *needed* to fall for a dame like Mrs Lambert! With her troubles. It would be jolly waiting for the State of California to make her a widow.

Rick passed up the saloon, and the beers Went home to his three rooms in a Federal Housing Project on the Richmond waterfront From his windows, he had a terrific view of a War Surplus shipyard rusting out in the Bay fog A grim trap Tonight, he was glad that was how it was. If Mrs Lambert was going to haunt him, she needed fancier surroundings

He opened a couple of cans and fixed some dinner, stacked the dishes in the sink, thought he'd read a little, then turn in It didn't work The words in the magazine didn't cooperate They just laid there

He threw the magazine down, looked at the four moldy walls The hair-oil stains on the davenport arm, the battered, tacky furniture He had to get out of there Maybe a bartender would beat talking to nobody . . . or there might even be a dame cadging drinks for conversation

Someone was leaning on Rick's doorbell He came out of the big chair a foot, landed nearly running for the door It could be her He was listed in the phone book She might want to thank him for putting her onto Father Hagan

Yeah, or a bum with a sad pitch for a handout.

He was wrong both times There were three people crowded on the block of cement he called the front porch A woman and two men He'd never seen any of them before There was enough light from inside the room for him to be sure.

Rick said, "Yeah?"

One of the men was a tall, lean, handsome type, with dark hair and eyes He was wearing a baggy tweed suit, bright green even in the dim light. He said, "Are you Mr Castro?"

Rick nodded "Right. What can I do for you?"

The man said, "May we come in and talk to you?"

Rick regarded them suspiciously. "What're you selling?" he asked "Maybe I can save you some time. There isn't much I need"

The other man, shorter, chunkier, with a small, black mustache, pushed forward a step "We're not selling anything, Mr Castro," he smiled, narrowly. "We want to talk to you . . . about Arthur Lambert."

Rick opened the door wider for them to troop in "Okay," he said. "I'm just a little gun shy The last people I let in here sang psalms to me for half an hour before I could chase them out."

The lady in the crowd smiled warmly as she passed Rick She had brown hair and eyes, good teeth for smiling. She had on a wine-colored suit under a big fur wrap, looked expensive.

Rick waved his guests to chairs, said, "I don't know why you want to talk to me Except what I read in the papers, I don't know anything about Lambert. I hope that's not a big disappointment to you"

The woman let her fur wrap slip from her shoulders, showed her teeth again. She said, "We know all about you, Mr. Castro You see, I'm Arthur Lambert's sister. This," she indicated the shorter of the two men, "is my husband, Harold Addams. He's been representing my brother"

"And—" the tall character was still on his feet, came across the room to Rick, extending a hand "I'm Tony Sarhoe," he said. "Art Lambert and I were in business together Partners"

"I GUESS that makes you a private dick," nodded Castro. "So I won't ask how come you know about me."

"As a matter of fact," said Mrs Addams brightly, "Tony didn't have anything to do with it. When Jani—that's my sister in law returned to the hotel this afternoon, she told us she had met you on the ferry and how kind you'd been, introducing her to Father Hagan"

Rick watched Sarhoe uncouple over the big chair. He said, "Father Hagan's a good man He throws a lot of weight at Quentin."

"That is why we've come to talk to you, Mr. Castro," smiled Mrs Addams "This is a very difficult situation. I'm not sure you understand it fully."

"I don't understand it at all," commented Rick. "Mrs. Lambert wants to talk to her husband. Is there more?"

"Yes, a great deal," said Mrs Addams, her face sobering. "Did Jani tell you Arthur does not wish to see her?"

"She made a point of it," Rick acknowledged "That's why she wanted to kill herself."

Mrs Addams gasped. "Kill herself?"

"I don't suppose she told you *how* she met me," Rick said "But I grabbed her, as she was about to jump over the side. Maybe I'm a heel to mention it."

Mr Addams cleared his throat. "No," he said, "she didn't tell us. We're certainly indebted to you, Mr Castro."

"Forget it," Rick said. "It was a crazy idea she had She knows better. But I still don't savvy what this is all about"

"It's very simple," declared Sarhoe. "Art does not want to see his wife. He

doesn't want to talk to her, listen to her He wants to be left alone, period "

"During his trial, he wouldn't even let me use her as a witness," added Addams sadly. "Not that I feel she would have been of any great value to the case, but I don't believe her absence from the stand made a particularly favorable impression on the jury."

"You see, Mr Castro—" Addams' wife had picked up the ball and was running with it now —"Arthur feels it will be best for Jani to get him out of her system as soon as possible I may be prejudiced in my brother's favor, Mr Castro, but I honestly think he is trying to do the most decent thing possible in a very messy situation."

"Right," Sarboe rumbled from deep in his chair. "I tried to argue with him once about it and didn't get anywhere."

"Okay," Rick nodded "Lambert doesn't want to see his wife. What am I supposed to do?"

Addams coughed. "Jani told us Father Hagan was arranging an interview for her."

"And you wish I'd queer it," snorted Rick "You don't know the padre. If he promised the girl a chance at her husband, she'll get it I'm not man enough to change his mind for him "

"You won't help us, then?" Mrs. Addams' face puckered in a perplexed frown.

"I can't," said Rick "I don't have that kind of suction with the Father Offhand, I'd say Lambert will have to steel himself to an interview with his wife Frankly, if that was the worst he had to look forward to, he'd be the luckiest joker in the San Quentin death house "

Rick's three guests were on their feet. Mrs Addams had drawn her fur tight around her throat, as though she were suddenly cold or was afraid her mink would be contaminated by that flea bitten davenport. She said a very chilly, "Good night," as she led the parade out.

Sarboe was the last out. He said, "We don t blame you, old man."

Rick shrugged. "It wouldn't make a bit of difference to me —or Lambert—if you did."

HE HAD a rough night He couldn't sleep Every time he closed his eyes, he'd see Jani Lambert's scared, cold face. He'd talked pretty rugged to her Everybody seemed to be kicking her around for her own good It was fine to build character, but sometimes it might be a good idea to try a little understanding

Sure, Mrs. Addams was a hundred per cent right What her brother was doing was probably in Jani's interest. It was tough on him, too But wouldn't it have been a hell of a lot better, Rick thought, if just once Lambert had taken time out from being a noble-type heel, long enough to explain to Jani how he felt, what he felt?

It was a stupid way for Rick to keep himself awake; but he lay there for hours, writing dialogue in his mind for Art Lambert. What *he,* Rick, would have said to Jani

It wasn't easy Most of it set up as pure soap opera He finally wore himself out, slept fitfully until the alarm sounded off

He sat on the edge of his bed, holding his head He couldn't have felt worse if he'd been on an all-night bat His stomach was jumping.

Rick pulled on his working clothes and shuffled to the kitchen, brewed a pot of coffee He scalded his mouth trying to drink it; too hot He didn't feel any better The weather man was no help had delivered a gray, overcast morning Rick could hear foghorns on the Bay. They sounded like they had their troubles, too He got his car and drove to work

He was okay as long as he was busy — but those intervals while they were under way were strictly murder. He had time to

think, to look at Quentin. He knew that was a bad idea, but he couldn't stop, had to wonder what it was with Lambert over there behind those high walls. How would Lambert be when he faced Jani? Would she be any better off for seeing him?

Every time they pulled into the Richmond slip, Rick was alert for Father Hagan's car. He'd almost sold himself a bill of goods. Maybe he had no business telling the Father what to do about Jani Lambert. But, at least, he ought to let Hagan know what to expect when those two people met. In a way, Rick told himself, he was responsible.

It was nearly ten o'clock before Father Hagan's coupe bumped aboard the car deck of the *El Prado,* the first customer in line for that trip. Rick waved him through to the other end of the tunnel, yelled at Swanson to take over, and trotted after the padre's car.

Father Hagan was just setting the hand brake when Rick caught up with him. His face seemed a little gray, to Rick, the line of his mouth, hard.

Rick smiled through the car window at him. "Good morning, Father. I've been waiting for you."

The Father shook his head bleakly. "A terrible thing, isn't it, Rick?" he said. "I couldn't believe it."

Rick frowned. "What do you mean, Father?"

"The young lady you introduced me to yesterday. Mrs. Lambert. You know, don't you? It was in the morning paper."

Rick grasped the Father's shoulder. "I haven't seen a paper. What happened to her?"

Father Hagan sighed, handed a folded daily through the car window to Rick. He was silent as Rick opened the paper, stared at the headlines.

Castro had to read the lead on the story twice before he could make himself realize the people named were real; he'd talked to them yesterday. Mrs. Addams was dead. According to the newspaper report, she'd been beaten about the head with a heavy lamp-base. Jani Lambert was in the Emergency Hospital, hanging on the edge of death from an overdose of sleeping tablets.

The two women had been discovered in Jani's room at a Berkeley hotel by Harold Addams. He had wakened in the night, found his wife not in the bed, had gone through the adjoining bath into Jani's room. Addams, the paper said, was in a state of nervous collapse, also in the hospital. The Berkeley police were satisfied Jani had killed her sister-in-law, then attempted to take her own life with an overdose of drugs.

Rick folded the paper carefully, passed it back to Father Hagan. He was trying to think, pick up the pieces. It was like grabbing handfuls of Bay fog. He heard Father Hagan say something about being

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sorry, pulled himself together enough to nod, "Yeah, Father Thanks Look, I'll be seeing you'

He ran the length of the boat The ramp was just being cranked up He leaped on it, scrambled to the dock

Swanson yelled at him as he passed, "Hey, Castro! Where you goin'?"

Rick didn't bother to answer He sprinted down the pier to where his car was parked He beat the old boiler over the road snaking through the Richmond hills; oil refineries, grave pits and other points of interest He wasn't sure what he expected to accomplish, or if he'd have a job when he got back to the *El Prado.*

But he cussed out every stoplight that slowed him down between Richmond and Berkeley. Strictly Lochinvar in a '38 coupe. Or maybe he was more like that Spanish joker, Don Quixote . .

CHAPTER THREE

Putting on the Squeeze

RICK ground to a big stop at the desk of the Emergency Hospital An old, gray-haired lady with store teeth and a black sack suit blew the whistle on him. She had to muddle around on the phone, before she gave him the word to go on The suspicious way she looked at him while she was on the phone was no nerve tonic for Rick But she finally squeezed out an anemic smile, told him to go to Room 314

Rick said, "Thanks," and hurried down the corridor to an elevator He could almost feel the old girl's eyes branding his back

The door of Room 314 was shut, with a "*No Visitors*' sign on it, which Rick ignored He knocked, and the door was opened by a young guy about Rick's build —a hundred and eighty-five pounds, well-assembled, wide shoulders He was wearing a gray suit, looked like a doctor. Rick asked, "Can I see her, Doc?"

The young guy smiled faintly, but opened the door

"Come in, Castro."

Rick was momentarily blinded by the glare of light off the white walls. Even half blind, he could tell there was something very sour about this The tall hospital bed was occupied, but not by Jani Lambert

Harold Addams was sitting up in the bed There were dark, liverish circles under his eyes, and he needed a shave The hospital jacket didn't quite cover him He had a fine pelt of black hair on his arms and chest

Tony Sarboe sprawled in an easy chair in one corner of the room Standing beside the bed was another character, almost bald, who looked more like a corpse than Addams His lips thin white as the rest of his face He nodded at Castro. "Sit down Get to you later"

Rick found a straight chair, tilted it against the wall Sarloe was smoking a cigarette It seemed like a good idea Rick had a cigarette, but no matches. As he was searching his pockets, the young guy who had let him into the room came over, snapped a lighter in front of Rick's face

He said, "We're Berkeley police, Castro Homicide detail."

Rick managed a weak grin "I'm glad to hear it," he said "When your friend said he'd get to me in a minute, I thought maybe he meant he wanted to sharpen up his carving technique"

The young cop chuckled "I thought so You should have seen the expression on your face'

"Okay," the other inspector said, rubbing bony fingers over his bald head "Let's pick this up. Mrs Lambert must have had some reason for killing your wife Do you have any ideas?"

Addams rolled nervously on the big hospital pillow His voice sounded far away,

like he was under the pillow. "No, I haven't Always thought . . . they were very close"

"Why did you and your wife come to Berkeley with Mrs Lambert?" the little cop wanted to know.

"My wife's brother . . Art . . . Jani wanted to settle somewhere near while he was at San Quentin Donna and I were going on to Sacramento . see the governor . . about a stay of execution."

"To your knowledge, the two women weren't battling?"

"No, Inspector We had dinner together last night. Everything . . seemed all right."

Rick watched the little cop jam his hands in his coat pockets, turn and walk to the window. He rocked up on his toes, like he was peering over the sill He said, "Out of a clear sky, Mrs. Lambert beats your wife's brains out with a lamp base That's for the birds, Addams."

Rick Castro cleared his throat "Look," he said. "Why don't you ask Mrs. Lambert about it?"

The younger detective shook his head. "We would, Castro But she's still hopped to the eyes."

Sarboe crossed his long legs. "Maybe I can throw you an idea, Inspector," he sighed

The little guy whirled from the window, said, "We're wide open Why do you think Mrs Lambert did it?"

Sarboe made a vague gesture with his hands. "I'm afraid it may have been my fault," he said bleakly "I came up here just to be on hand in case there was anything I could do Art and I were in business together for a good many years I felt very close to everyone concerned Now, I wish I'd stayed home definitely, if I'm right about this

"LAST night Harold, Donna and I were having a late drink in the hotel cocktail lounge. Jani Mrs. Lambert had gone to bed early I happened to pass a remark, and I wish now I'd cut my throat

"Remember, Harold?" He was talking to Addams across the foot of the hospital bed. "Remember, I said I had a weird hunch on that killing down South? Why Art was so adamant about not seeing his wife?"

Addams nodded his head feebly.

"I said," Sarboe went on, "I'd begun to wonder if Art didn't believe, by confessing the murder of Nadine Brent, he was taking the rap for Jani

"Here's what I meant Art knew Nadine Brent over quite a period of time She was raising hell, insisted he break up his marriage She d told Art that unless he made things clear to Jani, she would. I know, because the guy talked to me about it.

"Okay. Nadine Brent decides she's waited long enough She calls Jani, has her come over for a showdown. The girls stage a hassel and Nadine is shot Art finds the body, realizes what's happened. He blames himself for making Jani a killer Under those circumstances, the only right thing for him to do is take her place in the gas chamber So he confesses."

Tony Sarboe fumbled through the pockets of his tweed jacket for a cigarette, chain lit it before he continued. "I said something like that last night. Of course, I tried to qualify it as only a wild guess."

The small detective nodded "Then, you figure, after the party broke up in the cocktail bar, Mrs. Addams waited until her husband was asleep, went in and confronted her sister in law with what you've just told us It was too close to the truth; Jani was frightened, trapped. Acting on impulse, she killed Mrs Addams with the lamp base, then realized what she'd done, took sleeping pills.'

Sarboe shifted his cigarette to the corner of his mouth, puffed thoughtfully for a moment. "It looks like I'm stuck with

saying yes, although I don't like to"

There was a big lag in the conversation. Rick could sense that Jani Lambert had a leg on a chair in the gas chamber

The young cop said, "Castro, the receptionist said you were asking for Mrs. Lambert. You claimed to be a friend of hers. How about that?"

"I was only lying a little, Inspector," said Rick apologetically. "I met Mrs. Lambert for the first time yesterday. I read about her trouble in the paper, and thought I ought to see if there was anything I could do." He stood up, pointing himself toward the door. "From what I've heard," he added, "I think you can get along without me"

Nobody pleaded with him to stay. . . .

Rick Castro got his heap, drove one short block to a parking place where he'd be able to watch the front entrance of the hospital. He saw the police inspectors come out and drive away, pretty nurses, and some with legs that looked like a piano in white stockings. It was nearly an hour before Tony Sarboe left the hospital.

Rick jumped out of his car and met the Hollywood detective at the sidewalk He said, "Tony, there's a small matter we have to discuss."

Sarboe eyed him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"A deal, Tony—if you want me to buy that story you told the cops I didn't queer it for you up in the room, because I figured you were a guy I could deal with. You or Addams whichever one of you actually killed his old lady. Jani Lambert and her husband mean nothing to me. I could forget I ever heard of them for—well, make it easy on you. Ten grand"

Sarboe's face darkened "You know I can have you thrown in the can for blackmail, don't you?"

"I'm real worried," snorted Rick. "I could tell the little, bald headed cop how anxious Jani Lambert was to speak to her husband. How she tried to kill herself when he walked off the ferry without acknowledging her. Why would a dame who had the best reason in the world to know her husband was taking a bum rap for her be so anxious to talk to him? Like I hear those private eyes on the radio say, it don't figure!"

Sarboe's lean face set in a hard mask. "You'd better stop listening to the radio," he said, walking away from Rick

"You and Addams talk it over," Rick called after him "You know where to find me. Take your time But don't run it in the ground"

HE HAD to stand still for a chewing from the Old Man when he got back to the ferry It was an expert job The old boy stomped around the pilot house, waving his arms, his face red and swollen as though he were choking on his collar. "Your record's good, Castro, or I'd throw you off right now. Go below and get to work."

Swanson had a fat leer for Rick when he appeared on the car deck "'I thought maybe you'd run off and got married," he said

"I would've asked you first," growled Rick, going to his loading station.

It was late in the afternoon before Rick had any action out of the time bomb he'd set under Sarboe He'd expected something, but not this. Not so fast

They'd made their west run, pulled into the San Quentin slip The ramp was down, the car deck blue with gasoline fumes Rick unhooked the chain strung across the exit; started to carry it to the other side of the ship, out of the way He about half made it He heard Swanson yell, the roar of an engine almost on top of him.

Rick dropped the chain, dived. He had a flash picture of a panel truck, black,

swinging as close to him as it could get without running its front wheels off the ramp. The left rear wheel passed over his ankle. He screamed, blacked out.

When he came to, someone was wiping his face with a wet towel. The Old Man. He craned his neck around at the ring of faces surrounding him. He was lying on the deck.

The skipper's face was very grave, worried. Rick managed to croak, "Bad?"

"I don't know, Rick. I can't feel anything broken in your ankle. You hit your head on the rail. Do you feel like sitting up?"

Rick groaned. "I'll try anything once. Give me a hand." Rick went for the full treatment, stood up. His ankle was sore, but could take his weight. He gimped around, grinned at the skipper. "I'll be okay."

"You're sure?" the Old Man asked. "You can knock off if you want to."

"No," Rick said. "I'm into you for enough time already today. Let's go." He hobbled along the rail, and stopped.

"Hey," he said. "Did anybody get that joker's license number?"

The Old Man shook his head. "They abandoned the truck about a mile up the road to San Rafael. You can see it from the pilot house. I radioed the State police and they're investigating."

Rick turned and dragged his sore ankle to the other end of the ferry.

He thought he was getting around fairly well, by the time Father Hagan drove aboard the *El Prado* for the return trip to Richmond. The exercise seemed to help the ankle and, except for a beautiful mouse over his right eye, Rick was okay.

The padre saw him limping along the deck, however, and waited for him. "What happened to you, Rick?"

Rick told the padre about the visit to the hospital, his talk with Sarboe and the brush with the panel truck.

"It might have been an accident," he grinned crookedly. "I don't think so. Either Sarboe or Addams—maybe both of them—have done some heavy thinking. They know that blackmail pitch is only a gimmick to drag them out in the open. So they're going to pay me off in lumps. Maybe I'll discourage easy."

Father Hagan shook his head sadly. "Wouldn't it be better for you to go to the police and tell them what you know? I'll back you up."

"No, Father," Rick said. "Because we don't know anything for sure. Besides, this is a private feud now. I want to keep it that way."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death-House Guest

RICK CASTRO worked a full shift, plus the time he owed the company for his hospital jacket. It was dark when he checked out. He got in his coupe, drove through the toll gate. He'd gone a couple of hundred yards down the road toward Richmond, when he heard someone cough behind him.

Rick slammed on the brakes, swerved to the side of the road. He twisted around, saw Father Hagan's large face beaming at him in the glow of the dash panel.

"What are you doing here, Father?"

The padre grinned. "You said these men played rough, Rick. I thought you could use a little spiritual support."

"You've been waiting for me all this time?" asked Rick.

"Yes," the Father said. "And while we're on the subject, an opera seat is no place for a man of my build. Do you mind if I crawl up front with you?"

Rick chuckled. "No, Father. As long as you're on this cruise, you might as well go first cabin."

Father Hagan settled himself beside Rick with a heavy sigh. "What I'll do to

try and build a large congregation!"

Rick laughed, and slipped the car in gear. They drove along the shore of the Bay for about a quarter of a mile, almost to the gravel pits. Rick passed a car parked on the shoulder of the road, saw its headlights blink on and off, then on again. His mouth was suddenly dry, the skin tight across his chest as the car swung onto the road in back of him.

At the pits the road made an abrupt turn inland, up a hill, through the oil-storage tanks of the Standard Refinery. As Rick started into this turn, he saw a car coming the other way, across the white line.

He said, "This is it, Father," swung his coupe sharply into the gravel company's private road, tried to bulldoze a thoroughfare through a pile of loose sand. It didn't work. The engine of the coupe groaned, died.

In the rear view mirror, he could see the other two cars leave the highway, converge on him. He snapped off his headlights, opened the door on his side and stepped into the soft sand to his shoe tops. He said, "You stay here, Father. Maybe if I can decoy them far enough, you'll be okay."

He was off, limping through the sand as fast as he could go. He wanted to be a long way from that coupe when they caught him. He wasn't.

The two cars blocked him off, their lights out. He made the shadow of one man leaving one car, two moving in on him from the other. Real tender odds! If one of the three had a gun, it'd be over quick.

Sucking in all the air he could get into his lungs, Rick ran toward the single man approaching him. There was enough light filtering down from the dark sky, reflecting from the overcast, for him to make this guy out. Tony Sarboe.

Rick lunged, and they went down together, rolling in the gravel. The rocks were sharp, cut his hands. Somehow, he got a mouthful of it. His face rubbed raw under Sarboe's shoulder. He drew his knees up, and catapulted Sarboe away from him.

They came to their feet, sprawling across the sand at each other like a pair of drunken deep-sea divers. Rick squared off with Sarboe, expecting any second to have the private dick's two pals climbing all over his back. He didn't have time to look around to see how soon this was going to happen.

Sarboe was a good man in a Pier Six brawl, and Rick knew he had to get him first, or catch himself some very sudden death. He hit Sarboe with everything he had, before he could get loose. Still, Sarboe's boys stayed out of it.

Rick knocked Sarboe into a stanchion supporting a big overhead crane. The detective's head made a very loud noise. He slumped to the ground. Rick banged Sarboe's head against the stanchion a couple more times for insurance, then started hauling him toward the cars by the collar.

All three heaps were there, dark blots against the yellowish gray of the sand. There was another, more irregular blot. When Rick got to it, he saw Father Hagan sitting astride two very weary gentlemen. The padre didn't even have his black hat off.

He said, "Everybody accounted for, Rick?"

"Yeah, I think so." Rick grinned through a stiff lip he knew would be fat and sore in the morning. "What're you trying to do, Father," he asked, "hatch those characters?"

Father Hagan stood up, dragging the two limp figures with him. "There's a Scriptural passage to cover this situation, Rick," he chuckled. "But this isn't the time or place for it. Shall we go?"

Rick said, "I haven't lost anything here except a little blood, Father."

They didn't try to free Rick's coupe from the sand, drove Sarboe and his two hoods to the jail in Sarboe's sedan . . .

WHEN Father Hagan drove aboard with Jani Lambert and her husband, Rick Castro was on the ferry. He was taking them to Richmond to catch the daylight streamliner south. Rick flagged them to the place he wanted them to park, then went about the business of stacking other crates as they rolled aboard. He noticed the padre and his two passengers stayed in the car.

When he was through, Rick went over and met Art Lambert. He was a nice guy, the kind a dame should fight for. *"Even if she does, I understand what she's fighting,"* Rick thought, remembering the first day he met Jani.

He leaned at the window of Father Hagan's coupe, talking to them about their plans when they got back to Los Angeles. "I might go down there sometime," Rick smiled. "I'll sure look you up."

Lambert's smile sobered. "If you don't I'm supposed to be a pretty good detective, Rick. I'd find you if I have to trail you to the end of the earth, and cut your heart out. Jani and I owe you a lot. More than we can ever do anything about. So look us up, mister."

Rick felt his neck getting hot. He half wanted to crawl under the car and hide. "Look," he said, embarrassed. "Before you people give me a hero complex, or I get the idea I ought to be in Mr. Lambert's racket, I want to make a small admission. I didn't know what I had till Sarboe started to talk at the Berkeley Station. I thought either he or Addams had probably killed Mrs. Addams and framed Jani.

"Looking at it from here, of course, it had to be Sarboe, because if it had been Addams, he'd have waited until he was sure Jani was dead, too, before he broke the news of his wife's murder. The fact Jani was alive put Sarboe in kind of a spot. He had to double Jani's guilt. So he told the story about Art's mix-up with this Nadine Brent woman.

"Later, he told the Berkeley police, after our friend in the striped pants blew how he and this dame Brent had been shaking down prominent L. A. citizens, and Nadine threatened to double cross him by telling you what they were up to unless she got all the loot. How he made her call Jani, and then framed her killing so you'd think Jani had done it. That was all news to me.

"Of course, it all tied in with the second killing. He had to keep you and Jani separate. When that situation got out of hand, he had the answer he thought. Dope a drink for Jani, and then get Mrs. Addams into Jani's room and kill her. A real good guy, Mr. Lambert. You ought to miss him around your office."

The Old Man was leaning on the whistle for the Richmond landing. Rick squared his shoulders, stood back from Father Hagan's car, said, "Well, folks, so long. I hope I'll see you again sometime."

They all smiled at him. Father Hagan said, "You'd better see me, young man. Remember, that right cross of yours still looks like a barn door loose in a high wind. If you tangle with the wrong man, he'll murder you."

Rick grinned. "Sure thing, Father." He trotted to the Richmond end of the ferry. He was standing at the rail as Father Hagan's coupe bounced up the ramp.

Swanson leaned beside him.

"Wasn't that your girl?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Her husband with her?"

"Yeah."

Swanson shook his head. "Castro, I don't get you."

Rick straightened, dug a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. "That makes an even two of us," he said.

THE END

BUILD-UP FOR MURDER

The professor's big jungle pets almost made a monkey out of half-pint snooper Mike— when he tried to ferret out a fortune-hunting heel . . . from his happy killing grounds.

By T. T. FLYNN

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CHAPTER ONE

Murder Menagerie

A GOAT named Allspar had just cost me ten in the fourth at Hialeah when the loudspeaker called my name. "Mr. Michael Harris wanted at the manager's office!"

I said: "Damn!"

The New York office of the Blaine International Agency thought I was in Sun Valley, Idaho. Snow-covered mountains, snowballs, snow suits, snow flowers and snow maidens. Vacation time in snow land for Mike Harris. And I'd sneaked to Miami, instead, and bought a racing form.

I flipped a quarter and lost. And in the track office a telephone call was waiting.

"Hello!" I snapped.

"*Tag,* you're it!" said a voice I knew only too well. "Put on your skis, Mike, and do a slalom here to the office."

It was Bradley, manager of the Blaine Agency Miami Office.

"You can't do this to me!" I yelped. "I'm on my vacation! I went away from mugs like you!"

"Tag!" said Bradley again. "You should have known the bangtails were

bad luck." And Bradley hung up on me.

The Blaine Agency did such things to you. When orders came to jump, you jumped. So I taxied to the office in the Geigler Building on Flagler Street, with murder on my mind. And the blonde hand grenade, Prudence Parker, was on duty outside Bradley's door.

"Mike! This *is* a surprise! Mr. Bradley will see you in a minute. He's telephoning."

"He should be gagging," says I. "How about a date tonight?"

"Heavens, no!"

"Engaged?"

"No."

Which didn't make sense. But I went on in to Bradley. He waved and went on talking into the telephone.

"Everything's set. He just came in. I'll give you a ring later," Bradley hung up and chuckled. "Greetings, sucker."

Bradley's iron gray hair and smile could set a dowager cooing. He dressed like a clubman and was smooth as a calm on Biscayne Bay and harder than a Chicago crook down for the season.

In winter between Key West and Jacksonville, Bradley rode herd on Blaine clients who dusted off their yachts and mansions, rented costly hotel suites, and took the lid off with a bang. Now Bradley put a custom made shoe on the desk, leaned back and grinned.

"My rabbit's foot said you were out at the horse yard. You can't beat a rabbit's foot."

"I'll barbecue that rabbit's foot," I promised sourly. "What's the pay off?"

"How do you get along with apes, Mike?"

"Pretty well, considering some I have to work with. Cut out the clowning. What gives?"

Bradley reached for a cigarette and struck a match.

"Murder, maybe," he said past the flame.

"Why pick on me? Where's Solly Dearborn, Hank Trimble or Dave Champion? They're all good enough to be shifted down here every year."

"True," says Bradley. "But they haven't got red hair and around five feet of height."

"What's red hair got to do with it?"

"SEARCH me," says Bradley cheerfully. "The lady is an invalid. She specified one redhead, not easily frightened, with a calm disposition available at any hour around the clock."

"She wants a gigolo! I'm no bedside Romeo!"

"Mrs. Constance Haig," says Bradley, "ordered you for her husband. She is convinced that she hasn't long to live. And she looks to the Blaine Agency, and you, Mike, to keep her going."

"She needs a doctor!"

"She needs a detective, and a damn good one," Bradley told me calmly. "The man she thinks will kill her is Professor Waldo K. Haig, her husband, in case you've never heard of him."

"I haven't."

"You will," Bradley promised. "The professor is a slick article."

"Another Bluebeard?"

"A cousin and an uncle died in suspicious circumstances. The professor inherited. And he shows signs of needing money again. You'll like this case, Mike."

Bradley knew me. I like murder. There's always a degree of danger when a private cop begins nosing around murder. Killers don't usually get panic-stricken and lam. They've planned well. They watch to see what happens.

Soft footing strangers are asking for trouble. A killer doesn't hang any higher or fry any hotter for another murder or so. There's something about a murder case . . .

"You win," I yielded. "But what's my red hair and height got to do with the

lady getting knocked off for her money?"

"Time," says Bradley, "will doubtless tell. And it isn't her money. She's dependent on the professor. And he has his eye on a dame with a bankroll. Does it percolate?"

"He gives the sick wife the heave ho into the cemetery and marries more dough, eh?"

"Now we're set," says Bradley. "A car is on the way in now to pick you up at the Hotel Merrymor. Use your own name. The chauffeur will have you paged. You're not supposed to be a cop. Bless you my boy. You've taken a load off my mind."

Bradley's manner should have warned me. The uniformed chauffeur who picked me up at the Merrymor was named Briggs. He had the shoulders of a wrestler and a thick lipped, flat nosed face that stayed deadpan as we drove away in yards and yards of polished car.

"How's Haig to work for?" I asked.

"You aren't working for him yet," he grunted. "Don't try to pump me."

And how do you like that? I didn't. We had a silent ride out past Coral Gables into the flat, scrub woods country.

Concrete and blacktop gave way to a narrow shell road that finally came to a gate. A high, burglar proof fence ran out of sight to right and left through tangled scrub growth. Briggs got out, unlocked the gate, drove through and got out to lock it again. And I heard him swear behind the car.

"Flat tire!" he called. "Help me change it."

I got out and grinned.

"Don't try to chisel on a stranger, buddy. I'm not hired yet. I'll walk the rest of the way."

He was glowering in the hot afternoon sun as I walked away. Professor Haig had acreage. A quarter of a mile found me still on that narrow, winding road, with palmetto scrub giving way to a belt of dark green pines. Without warning, a gunshot back in the scrub sent a bullet screaming close.

"Hey, look out!" I yelled, ducking.

MOVEMENT crackled back in the scrub. Still farther back I heard a voice calling something like: "Ko ko—Ko ko!"

It didn't make sense. I saw the scrub brush shaking as some one approached. A dark shape took form. I saw the face—and I batted my eyes and choked on a yell.

It had vast, broad shoulders, long arms and a monstrous, nightmarish head without much neck. It stopped, peering through the scrub, and struck the great chest with a mighty fist and uttered a loud booming grunt.

I moved back on legs that suddenly felt rubbery. *"How do you get along with apes?"* Bradley had asked. I'd never seen an ape outside of a menagerie cage. But there, half-hidden in the scrub, was one of the hugest, ugliest apes I'd ever seen.

"I'll strangle Bradley for this!" I thought furiously. "He knew about it all the time!"

The ape made a lumbering step forward and I got set to run.

"Ko ko! Wait, Ko ko!"

Old Man Jungle hesitated, looking like redheads on foot made tasty hors d'oeuvres. The owner of the voice came in sight and it was a girl carrying a small rifle.

She went straight to that jungle nightmare and slapped one great, hairy shoulder. Exasperation was in her panting voice. "Ko-ko—I told you not to leave me!"

So help me, a huge dark hand lifted to her small hand and patted it gently.

"It's all right," the girl called. "Ko-ko won't hurt you."

"Lady," I asked, moving gingerly forward, "are you sure you know what you're doing?"

She laughed. Talk about beauty and

the beast Some beast; some beauty, in a silk blouse, jodhpurs and walking shoes Her hair was dark and her smooth, sun touched skin was flawless.

"While I was resting, Ko ko snatched up the rifle and fired it,' she explained "By the way, who are you? Strangers aren't supposed to be inside the fence."

"Flat tire back by the gate I'm Mike Harris, coming to work "

"Of course You're taking Jonathan's place I should have guessed from your red hair I'm Joyce Carrol, Professor Haig's secretary Ko ko, this is your new companion. Be polite to the gentleman, Ko ko "

"What's that?" I blurted as Ko-ko started toward me "I'm companion to *that?* What happened to Jonathan?"

Ko-ko snuffled at me and pawed for my hand. He had the strength of a wrecking crane

"Jonathan," says Miss Carrol regretfully, "lost his temper with an orang-outang named Mabel She slapped him and broke four ribs It was all so unnecessary "

"Four broken ribs when Mabel slapped him?" I repeated "There's *two* of these things?"

"Thirteen of them," she told me carelessly. "Don't you want to take a short-cut through the trees to the house?"

I wanted a short cut back to Miami and points north. Already my ribs felt queasy. Thirteen of the brutes and the little matter of the invalid wife and prospective murder. I reached for the quarter again. Tails I went back.

Heads came up and Ko ko reached for the shiny coin, sniffed it, and with thumb and forefinger bent it in half Miss Carrol laughed

"You see how Ko ko likes to play?"

"I see," I said grimly. "Tell me about this job "

Miss Carrol told me as we cut through the pine grove. Professor Waldo Haig had a theory that behaviorism in human beings had ancestral resemblance to behavior strains in apes. By understanding fundamental behavior patterns of the apes, one could better understand more complex aspects of behavior in people

Miss Carrol was enthusiastic about the idea I wondered how she'd react to the behavior pattern of a man contemplating murder

We came out of the pine trees onto green, landscaped lawns framing a big coral rock house and outbuildings Professor Haig had done himself well while he had it.

THERE was activity on the lawn south of the house. Men were nailing lumber, putting in posts, stringing wires, carrying chairs and tables

"Moving out for the animals?" I asked.

"Not quite," Miss Carrol said, and a shadow crossed her face. "Mrs Haig is entertaining tonight with a garden party and dance." She hesitated, and added: "It's to be the last, I believe, while the Haigs are here "

I tried to read her face. "Are they thinking of a change?"

"I really don't know," she evaded

Briggs drove up as we neared the house He lifted a hand to Miss Carrol and gave me a dirty look. Miss Carrol took me back to meet Professor Haig in a long low building behind the house.

The apes lived there Thirteen of them, in air conditioned rooms, with fenced walks outside where they could take the air and sunshine.

We paused on our way through the building to steer Ko ko into his room; and found Professor Haig in a big office at the far end of the building He was all of six feet, tanned and energetic.

"The work won't be as bad as you think," he told me genially. "How about a drink?" And Haig chuckled as he tonged ice-cubes from a small, portable

icebox beside a desk tray holding scotch, seltzer and glasses "A drink now and then helps your sense of proportion. Sometimes I'm not sure whether we're studying the animals or they're studying us."

"Careful, Mike," I thought. *"This guy can't be as regular as he acts."*

Behind his cheerfulness, Haig seemed nervous and under a strain He gulped the drink as if he needed it.

"We won't stand on ceremony," he told me. "Your quarters are at the other end of the building. As my assistant, you'll dine in the house with us. The routine will be familiar in a day or so Your sister can help you get settled."

"Sister?" slipped from me before I could stop it

Miss Carrol gave me a quick look. Haig didn't notice.

"She's with Mrs Haig, I believe They were over by the tennis court a little while ago."

And a slightly sarcastic voice spoke behind us. "Everyone busy—as usual?"

A look flashed between Haig and Miss Carrol It might have meant anything. The ghost of a frown that came on Haig's face was anything but enthusiasm.

"Hello, Lee. Meet my new assistant, Mr. Harris—Mr. Colson, my wife's brother." As I shook hands with Lee Colson, Haig said: "I was just telling Harris that his sister was over at the tennis court How about taking him over there? I've some notes to check with Miss Carrol."

Colson nodded He was about twenty-five, with a thin, sun tanned face and a black, hairline mustache. He looked like an addict of swimming and sports. White shoes, slacks and beach shirt were in perfect taste.

We were outside the building before Colson spoke with the same touch of sarcasm. "Waldo's work keeps him busy with Miss Carrol."

I said nothing.

Colson shrugged "I know who you are and why you're here "

"That's more than I know," I said. "Nice estate, isn't it?"

"While it lasted," he said with another shrug "It's being sold. There's Miss Harris, who Waldo thinks is your sister. She's keen with a racquet "

Gaily colored lawn chairs and sun umbrellas were by the court. Mixed doubles were being played. Four spectators were watching One, a woman, was in a wheel chair.

CHAPTER TWO

Happy Hunting Grounds

MY GUESS had been right. On the court, fast and graceful, was Trixie Meehan, of the Blaine Agency! Trixie smashed a sizzling ball over the net for point and game, saw me, waved her racquet and came to meet us.

You don't know Trixie Meehan, that little gorgeous who came trustfully across the grass? That blonde little kitten who could make strong men break down protectively? Then life has spared you!

Even the women guessed wrong on Trixie more often than not How could anyone tell that little blonde bundle of fluff was hell on wheels? I could; I knew her. Meet Trixie Meehan, who drew the toughest cases on the Blaine Agency list. I met her there on the smooth turf with players and spectators watching Trixie's arms go to me

"Mike, you dear! I'm *so* glad you're here!" And under her breath Trixie said: "Sun Valley—ha, ha!"

"Hello, Sis!" I said fondly –and bent Trixie's ribs with a squeeze. "I might have known you'd turn up in a dirty trick like this!" I snarled in her ear.

Trixie unobtrusively poked the handle of her racquet in my ribs and stepped back

smiling. Lee Colson introduced me to the others A Mr and Mrs Farwell, around forty, smart and swank A M ss Massey, with a Southern drawl *And* Mrs Haig, a thin, sharp featured woman smiling wanly from her wheel chair

"So glad to have you with us, Mr. Harris." Her words were shaded with double meaning

Trixie's partners in the game were a Ruth Talbot, a hearty young Tom Bryant, a rugged, perspiring older man named Caldwell. I heard Lee Colson put in an aside to Trixie:

"Coming along if Tom Bryant takes his boat out tomorrow? Connie can spare you for the day now"

Trixie cooed back: "You're a dear to think of me."

The real Trixie would have dazed him. I let her have it as we walked away to get me settled.

"Chiseling yachts and playboys?"

"Listen, ape," says Trixie coldly. "Who was sleep walking across the lawn with that mi lion dollar secretary?"

"Don't call me ape! Now that I'm bedding with 'em, it's personal! What about this Bluebeard plot?"

Trixie sobered "I'm getting frightened, Mike!"

"You frightened? Don't make me laugh!"

Trixie took my arm Her small, strong fingers pressed hard

"M ke, did you ever live night and day around hate and fear and the threat of murder? With sm les covering everything and a helpless woman, who can't walk a step, whimpering about it when you are alone with her at night?"

She paused, shuddered. "It's not knowing what will happen or when it will happen," says Trixie soberly. "Mrs Haig is close to a nervous breakdown The other night I stepped out into the hall just as Abdul, the butler, was passing, and I almost screamed."

"Who's Abdul?"

"Professor Haig brought him from India And he gives me the creeps."

"Haig doesn't seem so bad"

"His uncle and his cousin both died while he was visiting them," says Trixie "There was a police investigation that came to nothing But Mrs Haig says he's as good as admitted it to her After all, if there was much proof, something would have been done about it."

"So you think the lady's number is up?"

Tr xie drew a breath.

"Catching crooks is easy, Mike But try waiting to prevent a murder with nothing much to put your finger on! Hate under the surface, money almost gone, greed for another woman plain! I've got the jitters."

We detoured around the lawns while Trixie gave me the facts.

AS A youth, Haig had been a poor assistant naturalist with northern museums He had inher ted enough money from the death of his uncle to go hunting big game and collecting museum groups

More money had come from the death of his cous n He had married and taken Mrs Haig on a trip or two She had been injured while traveling in upper India and had never walked aga n Haig brought her home, bought the Miami estate and began the experiments with apes.

Now the estate was being sold The animals were going to zoos and c rcuses And Haig might consider himself in need of a marriage that would put him back in the big money again He chafed to get back on the world beat An invalid w fe and no money made a l itter future. And the woman with the money was Joyce Carrol, the secretary.

She had chosen museum work as a career after college Haig's unusual experi

ments had fascinated her. She had joined him as secretary And she had everything including a tidy half million in her own right and more to come.

I whistled

"No wonder wifey is nervous Is Haig wise to you?"

"I'm sure not," says Trixie "And when that other redhead assistant got slapped out of the picture by the lady orang, it was easy to ring you in Haig wanted some one who resembled Jonathan as much as possible."

"So you and Bradley got me within slapping distance of the same ape!"

Trixie snickered "She's one gal who'll have your number." That brought us back to my room at the end of the ape annex; and before Trixie left she said: "I'm worried about tonight, Mike Half of Miami will be here at the garden party. Noise, drinking, dancing heaven only knows what, with most of the guests down here from the north on the loose."

"Not a bad background for murder."

Trixie nodded "He's unusually nervous. Something is on his mind And if he's going to get rid of her, he hasn't much time left before the estate is closed. There won't be another such chance as this Tonight pays off all the social obligations and makes a perfect screen for a murder "

"Leave it to me "

"Gladly," says Trixie "And don't fall over your ego, Handsome."

So we had twilight and night, with apes to feed in the annex, and activity inside and outside the big house

Haig and Joyce Carrol helped start me in the routine of feeding the apes, then Haig had to leave us for his duties as host He was nervous, reluctant "I wish you were staying," he told Miss Carrol

"You know it's impossible," she said calmly.

A blind man could hardly have missed the bond between them. Add the covert intention of murder and it became gruesome Professor Haig suddenly didn't seem the big, genial, harmless man that he had appeared.

"Not staying for a dance?" I asked Miss Carrol when he was gone

She colored slightly. "I have other things to do."

That was when I began to wonder if a pretty girl in love would be above having a hand in murder, too It had happened with less provocation

The brief dinner in the house was poisonous only because I knew what lay behind the wan smiles of Constance Haig, the nervous silences of her husband and the edged sarcasm now and then from Lee Colson

A Professor Farthington, of the Cranston Museum in Philadelphia, was a guest And Abdul was there, turbaned, slippered, leopard silent as his tall figure moved around the table.

Lean, dark skinned, Abdul looked more of a fighter than a servant. He was some feet from me, looking the other way, when my napkin slipped to the floor Without looking around, he stepped to the serving table for a fresh napkin

"Sahib," he murmured, replacing the linen His eyes were like black glass, opaque, unreadable And the devil himself couldn't have seen my napkin drop without looking around.

Professor Haig made a story of the ape shooting at me.

"KO KO'S property sense differentiates from the watch-dog aspect or jungle instinct of food and home, if you see what I mean," he said to Professor Farthington

"Quite, quite," chirps Farthington He was on the pinched, myopic side, dry and dusty as a book on old bones "You mean ownership in the sense of *homo sapiens.*"

"Right. Ko-Ko also understands that

aiming a gun and firing it has destructive effect. You see the leap sub primitive intelligence can make?"

"Amazing!"

Mrs Haig spoke fretfully from her wheel chair at the end of the table

"I think giving such creatures loaded guns is dangerous Waldo and Miss Carrol tried to get me to watch Ko-ko at target practice I wouldn't go near. Suppose he decided to shoot *me?*"

I ticked that one off for the record It would be a smooth angle to murder And Joyce Carrol evidently had been doing her part in training Ko-ko to use a gun

"You're unduly alarmed, Constance," Haig said, annoyed at her mentioning the idea. "Ko ko wouldn't shoot you any more than he would shoot me "

"I hope not," Constance Haig said with a wan smile Her glance went to me Trixie looked at me and lifted one little blonde eyebrow a fraction. And I caught Abdul's black beady eyes taking it all in. No wonder Trixie had been getting the screams.

The big question was *when*. The apes would soon be gone. Haig's book would be finished Joyce Carrol would leave. Haig didn't have much time. Would he try tonight?

Broke as the Haigs were, they signed off from the Miami scene with a dance orchestra, extra servants and swank catering

A dance floor had been laid outside. Gay Japanese lanterns festooned the lawn. And when the automobiles began arriving, they kept coming The evening, I quickly saw, was going to be one of those things.

Constance Haig was a pale wraith of cordiality in her wheel chair in the drawing room as the guests arrived. Trixie, hovering behind the chair in a white and gold dress, was like a blonde little flower. We snatched a word together

"She's going outside when the dancing starts," Trixie said "I'll stay close to her."

"I keep wondering what could happen," I said.

"He's clever enough to have that planned, when he's ready You're going to be out back, Mike?"

"Until ten, so guests can see the menagerie Got your gun handy?"

"It won't be that bad "

"Don't forget it's murder if it's anything," I reminded.

So I had the ape annex on parade, lights on, strange women chattering, exclaiming, escorts wise-cracking about Professor Haig's hobby But most of them were startled to silence by the incredible size, the brute strength and the savage ugliness of Ko-ko.

The parade of strangers made Ko-ko nervous, irritable He moved restlessly about his room Several times he bared great white teeth as visitors looked through the glass and steel bars

Ten o'clock ended the show. Lights went off I lighted a cigarette and stepped out into the night with relief Beyond the house Japanese lanterns glowed gaily. The orchestra was playing Couples were dancing Lawn tables were filled The party was getting noisier

From the dark shadows I noticed a small coupe come swiftly from the driveway to the garage. The driver opened the door leading to Briggs' quarters above the garage Light through the doorway showed Joyce Carrol hurrying inside.

So she wanted some party, after all? Then abruptly it wasn't amusing She had hurried inside almost furtively. I wasn't fool enough to suspect her of personal feeling for Briggs

So what?

I flipped the cigarette away and eased over to the big coral rock garage, built for four cars. Garage doors were ajar. I stepped quietly and quickly inside, with the Haig cars.

CHAPTER THREE

Gorilla Loose!

HERE inside the stone walled garage, it was surprisingly easy to hear Briggs' rasping voice through the floor above

"Sure, I'll take care of it," Briggs was saying "There won t be a kick back If there is, I'll keep my mouth shut." And after a moment's silence, Briggs said: "Sure, I'll tell her "

I guessed Briggs was talking over the extension telephone to the house And his next words were to Joyce Carrol "He can't get away, just now He says can you wait?"

"I can t see that it will do any harm. Yes, I'll wait," she said, barely audible. "And be careful, won't you, Briggs? It won't take much to make them revoke your parole "

"I'll watch my step,' Briggs promised 'You wait here It won't take long. I'll let you know what happened."

Was Mike Harris listening hard? Don't be silly! Now we had a paroled convict working with Haig And Joyce Carrol back furtively after pretending she was gone for the night

The garage lights flashed on from a switch upstairs and I barely got outside in the night before Briggs hurried downstairs Halfway to the ape annex I stopped as I heard him open the garage doors.

He was taking one of the cars. I watched him back out and hurriedly weighed the chance of following him Then instead of turning away from me toward the driveway, Briggs swung toward the annex The dazzling car lights were over me before there was a chance of reaching cover

I had to step aside, swearing under my breath, as the car rolled to me and stopped abreast. Briggs spoke through the window.

"I was coming for you Jump in. There's some business the boss wants taken care of "

He was genial, friendly, apparently oblivious of my presence out here near the garage

"What s the business?" I asked as we drove away.

"You'd be suprised "

"I take a lot of surprising."

"Just wait," said Briggs

So I waited while we drove through the pines and scrub growth to the gate where overheard lights now showed two husky men on guard

"Private dicks," Briggs said as we passed "Admission by card only tonight."

"Protecting the guests' valuables?"

"No gate crashers wanted tonight." Briggs lighted a cigarette, hummed to himself and was in fine spirits as we came off the shell road onto blackstop and stopped "Out on your side, pal How are you on walking?"

"Not bad," I said, getting out.

Briggs followed. "Then keep walking rat!" he snarled.

For a second it didn't register. Then I boiled "What's the idea?"

"You're fired! Get it? The boss's orders Now scram."

I blew up. "Haig can tell me that! Out of my way, you dumb con! Let's get back to the house!"

I should have been looking When I opened my eyes, I was in the damp weeds off the road and Briggs and the car were gone He'd clipped me on the jaw like a professional

For a moment I was wild. Then I calmed and stood rubbing my aching jaw and thinking No use wondering how Haig had discovered I was a Blaine Agency man He had and had moved quickly to get rid of me tonight Not even time to pack No explanation Out like a bum instantly, with only Joyce

Carrol and Briggs knowing what was up.

"Okay!" I promised Haig back there behind his high fence and gate guards. "If you want it this way, you can have it! But if she's dead before I can stop it, you'll get the check!"

NO USE trying to climb the fence or argue with the guards I walked back to the narrow shell road and waited Late arrivals would be straggling in Fully ten minutes passed before an automobile came in sight It might be Briggs returning for all I could tell

But I was walking in the direction of the gate as it approached; and with a confident smile and a lifted hand I stopped it

"How about a lift back to the house?"

"Sure Hop in the back. It's Mr. Harris, the professor's new assistant, isn't it?"

So I had a break The driver was young Bryant, who had been playing tennis with Trixie He had a girl, another couple was in the back, and I hardly bothered to catch names as we approached the gate and I eased low in the seat

Bryant had a card We were in the grounds a moment later When they parked, I thanked them and left

Joyce Carrol's coupe still stood before the garage Briggs had put the big car back and left the garage doors open The Haigs' farewell party was fast becoming a scramble which I joined with an eye peeled for Waldo Haig

Constance Haig's wheel chair was close to the dancing and Trixie was close to the chair, little and lovely and deceivingly demure

"Any trouble?" I asked as we moved aside.

"Would it matter?" Trixie snapped "We could have been in the morgue wagon if it was up to you Where have you been? Haig was here a little while ago suggesting that he push her wheel chair out of the crowd so she could relax a little. When she didn't take the bait, he said he had something he wanted to discuss with her."

"What?"

"He didn't say," says Trixie. "But he looked queer He wasn't like himself He wanted to get her off alone."

"Don't let him" I said, and told Trixie what had happened She hadn't heard

"Mike, not a thing has occurred to let him know who we are"

"Well, he knows Now anything can happen Better not tell Mrs Haig I'm going out back and see what gives"

Away from the paper lanterns and house lights, the night was like heavy velvet with a top dusting of stars - Pine trees formed black ramparts around the smooth lawns. The lights, the music, laughter and noise were mocking props for the murder which Constance Haig feared

In my room in the ape annex I opened my kit bag in the dark and reached for my gun and flashlight The little flash was there But the gun was gone. So was the small leather folder that held my Blaine Agency credentials

I'd left the bag in the car while Briggs changed the tire It had been in here unlocked while I dined in the house. I damned the big ex-con under my breath and stood up with the light. Waldo Haig's office in the other end of the building had rifles and hand guns in a cabinet.

A door at the back of my room opened into the central hall, dark now. I hadn't moved five steps from my room when an explosive *whoosh* made me jump and use the flash

A nightmare face bared teeth at me from one of the rooms I muttered at it and went on The apes were awake restless

The door into Haig's office was ajar. When I stalked through, a hand grabbed my hair, yanked me off balance and the room seemed to hit me.

MY YELL might still have been in my ears when I came out of it My scalp felt torn off A great hand was scooping me over on the floor. Animal odor was strong In some manner I'd kept the flash. The beam struck up against dark coarse hair and a vast form hunched over me.

I yelled and struck up with the light. The great ape jumped back with a booming roar Startled, infuriated, he could tear me to pieces with those mighty arms. I rolled, scrambled halfway across the room.

The beam of the little flash flipped crazily about with my movements, and as I staggered up, the light struck the great brute across the room

He had come to his full, towering height, monstrous arms outspread White fangs showed threateningly. His eyes were glaring red In two jumps I reached the outer door, clawed it open and bolted out

Sweet night and room to run! I was shaking as I backed along the walk, with the light on the door to see what came out I almost yelled again when Joyce Carrol spoke behind me.

"Briggs?"

"I wish it had been!" I snapped "One of those apes is loose!"

She gasped. "I but I thought you'd left."

"Guess again And get away from here before that thing hurts you."

"But I don't understand. They're all harmless unless provoked Besides, they should be locked up. Why is one out?"

"Ask the ape I walked into the office and he jumped me Does my head look as bad as it feels?"

She gasped again as the light showed my face. "You're bloody! Was—was it done in the office?"

"Briggs didn't do it."

That silenced her. After a moment she said nervously: "Professor Haig must hear about this. He'll know what to do"

"He's going to, sister Let's find him"

We started to the house together and met Colson, the brother-in law.

"Hullo!" he said. "Back again tonight, Miss Carrol?"

"I forgot some work" she replied coolly.

"Where's Haig?" I put in.

"He's around somewhere. Sorry I can't help you I'm looking for Briggs. We need some more scotch"

"You'll need more than scotch for that crowd if they see what's loose," I said. "Get the professor. One of his biggest apes is out and it's his grief. Look what it did to me"

Colson's startled exclamation followed as I again put the light to my face.

"This is bad, Harris! Don't go out there where the guests can see you. We'll have a riot and the police here Slip in the back way to the study I'll get Waldo"

Servants in the kitchen went goggle-eyed as Miss Carrol guided me through to the study. Haig and Professor Farthington followed Colson into the booklined study a few minutes later. Did I get sympathy? I did not.

"Why are you back here, Harris?" Haig demanded brusquely.

"Why was I away so suddenly?" I retorted.

HIS NERVOUS gesture brushed aside the question I gathered from his glance at Farthington that he didn't relish family skeletons paraded before a guest.

"Which one is out? Ko ko?" he asked.

"It must be," said Miss Carrol

"How did he get out?"

I said: "What does it matter? He's out."

Professor Farthington was disturbed.

"I say, Haig, with all these people around, this can be dangerous. I remember on the second expedition into the Congo, I had to put four heavy caliber bullets into one old male that charged

me. He was only a step away when he went down, still reaching for me."

I revised my ideas of myopic little museum professors who looked dry as old bones. Haig was frowning at me.

"How badly are you hurt, Harris?"

"I'll live."

"I can't understand why Ko ko would attack you."

"You trained him."

He didn't like that, but didn't waste time arguing.

"Ko ko will have to be locked up Lee, you'd better help me."

"I've got to see Briggs and have him drive to the Gables for some more scotch."

"Nonsense. There are at least two cases more downstairs We can't have the guests alarmed Go out and see that they're not, if you won't come."

"I'll beg off if Harris is a sample of what your Ko ko is doing tonight," Colson refused.

"Ko-ko wouldn't hurt me," Joyce Carrol volunteered. "If you will stay here, I'll get him back in his room."

She said that to Haig with color in her cheeks She knew there must be danger and she wanted to meet it for Haig Protecting him.

"I wouldn't hear of it, Joyce," Haig told her gently.

But she wouldn't have it that way. She left the room with him, and Professor Farthington trotted along

"Shall I call a doctor?" Lee Colson said to me. He was pale. I wouldn't have thought danger so remote from the room could have put him into such a funk

"Go out and help keep an eye on your sister," I said "The professor knows who I am He had me put out of the grounds a little while ago That's why he's boiling He didn't expect me back."

"So that's it?" Colson muttered. "I knew something was wrong. Do you know what he intends to do?"

"I don't—and whatever it is, we'll see that he doesn't," I promised "Just stick around your sister until I find out what's what."

He nodded and left me; and I backtracked out of the house and eased over to the garage Briggs was my meat now. His quarters over the garage were lighted. Bloody face and all, I went up the stairs and knocked

No Briggs So I walked in.

A table lamp in the little parlor was on Briggs' corded uniform cap was on the table But no Briggs. I wondered about my gun and agency credentials and started looking for them

Nothing in the parlor I looked in the bedroom Nothing on the dresser that belonged to me I was about to leave when a fresh, damp shoe print just over the threshold caught my eye My own shoes were damp from the heavy Florida dew and had left marks where I stepped.

But I hadn't entered the bedroom Some one else had The prints went to the dresser and more faintly beyond it to a closet door. On a hunch I stepped lightly to the door and opened it

CHAPTER FOUR

Ashes of the Sahib

ABDUL was standing in there, silent as a white turbaned ghost, with his beady black eyes staring at me

"What's the idea of hiding in here?" I blurted angrily

Abdul came out without expression. The white turban made his face seem leaner, longer, darker.

"The Sahib Briggs lives here," he said

"I know that Where is he?"

Abdul shrugged, looked around the room and back at me. "Perhaps the Sahib Briggs has gone away."

"Gone where?"

"Inshalla, Sahib Who is Abrul to question the will of Allah?"

"I'll question it," says I, glowering at him "I want that guy You wouldn't be hiding in here if you didn't know something about it."

He stood passively looking at me I knew the signs. He didn't intend to talk. And I couldn't make him He hadn't done anything So I gave him silent treatment too and walked out

The lawn party was in full swing What a melee there'd be if they knew what was happening just beyond the gay lanterns Ahead of me, Miss Carrol was calling:

"Ko ko! Where are you, Ko ko?"

Haig and Professor Farthington were with her when I joined them.

"No luck?" I asked.

"Not yet" Haig said shortly.

"Where's Briggs?"

"I don't know," he spoke shortly.

Joyce Carrol spoke "Ko-ko likes those pine trees toward the gate You know he always makes for them when left alone Why don't I take the flashlight and see if he won't come to me?"

"Positively not," Haig refused "Not with those guns missing By the way, Harris, were you in my gun cabinet?"

"I would have been but I d dn't get a chance. Where's my gun?"

"I thought that was why you were in the office," was all he said "Two guns are missing The revolver Ko-ko uses for target practice and an automatic. You didn t get one of them?"

"I told you I didn't!"

"Ko Ko must have them," Haig said bleakly

"Bullets in them?"

"Both were loaded."

I thought of Mrs Haig's remark at dinner If Ko ko could hit targets, why not a person? That great, towering brute I'd last seen in the office would spread havoc through the lawn party if he charged among the guests with two loaded guns.

"He's set to blitzkrieg some one," I said "Better get the police here with a tommy gun and stop him quick."

"Oh, no, not *that!*" Joyce Carrol begged "We can coax him back."

"I can't bel eve Ko ko means harm," Haig said hesitantly "I don't want newspaper publicity Ko ko likes to ride around the grounds in an automobile Joyce, I'll drive your car to the trees and try to get him inside"

"Why can't I do it?" she protested

"I won't let you Where are your keys?"

"In the car," Joyce said As Haig left us, she spoke under her breath "He's worried I don't like it. I—I'm afraid"

MY MAULED head helped me believe her But this was Haig's worry I wanted Briggs. I wanted to know why Abdul had been hiding up there over the garage. I wanted to know what was going to happen after they got the ape locked up

So I went to my room, washed my face hurriedly, combed hair over the gash in my scalp and went looking for Trixie. She was with Mrs Haig

"For heavens' sake!" Trixie said, pulling me around so lantern light from overhead struck me better "Mike, you look like you've been cuddling with a meat grinder! What happened?"

"Didn't Colson tell you?"

"He stopped here for a minute, but he didn't say anything"

"But I told him to stay here with you!"

"I can't use him He's annoying. Tell me what happened"

I wisecracked. "I got pawed by that big ape Ko ko caught me in Haig's office He's loose now with a couple of loaded guns."

"Mike! Not that big gorilla!"

"None other."

"But—but all these people! These women! They're all helpless"

"It's not my party and not my ape Haig thinks he can get the brute back peaceably."

"But if he can't?" said Trixie

"Don't get trampled in the rush This fellow Abdul is up to something, too Watch him" I told Trixie what I'd found in Briggs' room "None of it checks," I said "I don't know what's in the wind Don't leave Mrs Haig, even if Haig is busy now."

"Are you going to find Briggs, Mike?"

"If he's around," I said

"Why shouldn't he be around?"

"Now you've got me," I admitted "But they can't keep making passes in the dark without dropping one Just keep your eyes peeled"

That was just talk We were boxing with shadows. We didn't have clues, a case, anything much to work on When Haig got his gorilla settled, he could have me tossed out again and I couldn't do much about it. Trixie, neither

Which would mean the case was bungled We'd failed Mike and Trixie marched up the hill and marched down again, helpless and foolish. The idea left me angry and my head hurt, anyway.

Trixie must have sensed my thoughts Her hand touched my arm

"It's a crazy set-up, Mike I'll be glad when we can leave."

I stood still, listening. A gunshot far out toward the pine trees had been barely audible through the dance music It might have been an automobile back-firing. None of the guests paid any attention to it.

But Constance Haig in her chair heard it. She stiffened, listened With quick movements she wheeled the chair around, facing us Queerly in that moment I noticed the lantern light on her thin, blue veined hands The strain she was living under had never shown more clearly. She was haggard Her eyes had a bright, feverish look

"Did you hear?" she asked us.

"What?" says I innocently

She searched my face. "Nothing," she said after a moment, and sat there listening.

I STARTED to leave Trixie followed me, speaking under her breath. "Mike, wasn't that a shot?"

"Couldn't have been anything else!" I said "And I don't think Haig had a gun Only the ape had guns and Haig went in that direction I'll see you later!"

Tom Bryant was at a lawn table with his party I cut over to his shoulder and spoke under my breath

"How about letting me use your car for a few minutes? It's important and I'm in a hurry"

He looked at me, told the others he'd be back in a moment and came with me

"Something's wrong," he guessed

"Maybe not I want to get to those pine trees in a hurry"

"I'll drive you," he said and asked no more questions as I led him at a run

The car caught up with Joyce Carrol, running in the driveway We picked her up She could hardly talk and part of it was fear

"He didn't have a gun!" she gulped "Ko ko must have shot twice!"

"What is this?" Bryant begged. "Isn't Ko ko that big gorilla of Haig's?"

"Keep your eye peeled for him," I warned. "He's loose with loaded guns!"

Bryant muttered an oath

The headlights were bright on the white driveway and reached on to stir shadows among the pines I could see no car lights ahead

"Keep on into the trees," I ordered

"I was afraid!" Joyce Carrol moaned beside me

The thing she was afraid of made my own nerves crawl. The black pine trees

ahead made sullen cover for nameless fears Never mind he dance music, the careless gaiety back there under the lanterns All that belonged to another world now

Ahead of us in the blackness was that great, hairy horror that had been trained in the habits of men That *thing* which wasn't a man by a million years of evolution That brutish primeval jungle man, more terrible because Waldo Haig had grafted human powers on the brute mind This was night, black night, and the pines might as well have been the gorilla's native jungle

"Where's Farthington?" I asked

"He ran to get a rifle," Joyce Carrol said huskily.

"There's a car!" Tom Bryant exclaimed "Look!"

Bryant stopped so fast the tires slid I swallowed at the sight of the great, hairy form which shambled, bent over, knuckles on the ground away from Haig's coupe

It swung around and raised up to its full height The great mouth snarled

"He's got a gun!" Bryant wrenched out. "See in his right hand!"

I saw it I saw something else on the ground beside the coupe. The big ape took a step toward us and Bryant hastily shifted into reverse

"Wait!" I said

THE brute turned slowly from our lights, put the knuckles of one hand to the ground and moved awkwardly away between the trees.

Bryant released his breath with an explosive rush "I thought he was coming for us! That gun must still be loaded"

"Drive closer," I said

Bryant did so, cautiously, stopping with the headlights full on the prone, motionless figure that lay beside the coupe. Joyce Carrol moaned again as she tried to get out of the automobile.

"Keep her in here!" I cried out to Tom Bryant "We may have to leave fast!"

It took only a matter of seconds to see that Haig had been shot twice above the eyes Either bullet would have killed him The gun was there on the ground where Koko had dropped it A .38 automatic. I put it in my pocket He might return and get it Back in the car, I said:

"There's nothing we can do He'd better stay there for the police"

There went Mrs Haig's fears Trixie and I had been lured to protect her from Waldo Haig and now Haig was dead Halfway back to the garage, we met Professor Farthington and Lee Colson Farthington had a rifle he'd evidently got from the gun cabinet in Haig's office.

"He must have called the beast to the car and it shot him," I said "Let the police handle it now. And if you don't mind, Professor, how about keeping watch with that gun, in case the animal comes toward the house? We'd better keep this quiet until the police take charge."

"It would be better," he agreed. "Frankly, I have little desire to meet a gorilla in the darkness"

I didn't blame him as Bryant let me out at the garage, where I could have privacy over the telephone I'd seen in Briggs' parlor

Homicide in Miami thought I was kidding

"So a guy is shot by a gorilla, is he?" the cop said reproachfully over the wire. "Listen, friend, why don't you take a cold shower an' turn in? It ain't healthy to drink so much and maybe wind up trying to drive your car and having an accident"

I finally convinced him

"You say that ape is out there on the loose gunning for people?" he asked loudly.

"Come and see—and bring guns."

He was swearing as he hung up When I turned, Abdul had come in noiselessly and was standing there with his dark lean face showing some emotion for the first time.

"The sahib is dead?" he said haltingly.

"That's right" I groped for a cigarette, studying his face "Ready to talk about Briggs?"

"The sahib was my father and my brother. Allah knows my grief"

"Too bad," I said. "But Haig would get reckless with those brutes. The police will be here in a few minutes, and you'll be needed in the house. For the last time, are you going to tell me what you know about Briggs?"

"Sahib, ashes on my head and my mouth tastes bitter. I have no talk of my sahib's household."

He turned away with dignity and I went downstairs ahead of him, trying to guess what lay behind his words. He knew about Briggs and he wouldn't talk Why wouldn't he talk? Because it wouldn't do Haig's household any good.

And why wouldn't it do Haig's household any good? Abdul was covering up—and not for Waldo Haig. For Briggs, the ex-convict? I didn't believe it. I had the sudden feeling of facts hovering just beyond reach, elusive, tantalizing

CHAPTER FIVE

Jungle Vengeance

AS I stepped outside, the motor of Haig's big sedan started in the garage. "Is that the chauffeur?" I asked Tom Bryant, who was waiting.

"No. That's Lee Colson"

"Where's he going?"

"He said something about driving to the gate and warning the guards."

"That's foolish!" I went to the big sedan as it backed out. "Don't drive through those pine trees, Colson! You may start that gorilla moving toward the house!"

"Damn you, Harris! Mind your own business! I know what I'm doing!"

"So do I."

I was on the running-board by then I grabbed through the window for the ignition key, got it away from his hands—and he hit me in the face. He was the athletic type; he could hit hard I lurched off the moving car, tripped, sprawled on the ground

Colson leaped out after me without bothering to stop the car as it coasted slowly back in neutral. He kicked me down again

"Give me those keys, Harris!"

Abdul had followed me out. "Sahib!" I heard him protest.

I was dizzy, groggy The car had stopped with headlights shining on us—and suddenly I stopped trying to get up I stayed there on the ground and found the beginning of a nasty smile

Colson was acting like a wild man.

"Keep out of this, damn you!" he warned Abdul furiously. "You're fired! Get out! I've been sick of you a long time!"

Abdul answered him with dignity.

"I have been faithful to the Sahib Haig. I am not a dog to be thrown out in the hour of his death"

"You heard me! You're fired!"

I poked the car keys into my pocket and came up grinning

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I've got a question, Colson! Where did you meet Professor Farthington after Haig was shot?"

Colson looked at me blankly. "I was out back of the house I saw the professor running with the gun and went after him"

"You've been around the house all evening? You haven't gone anywhere else?"

"Of course not! Do I get those keys?"

"You don't," says I. "But you can tell us why, if you've been around the house all evening, there's a pine needle between your right shoe sole and the upper It wouldn't stay there very long Where did you get it wedged in like that?"

Tom Bryant and Professor Farthington were listening Joyce Carrol had slipped away somewhere with her grief For a moment no one seemed to understand what I was driving at Not even Colson. The car lights were bright on his feet as he looked down blankly The others also looked.

Colson's shoes were damp from the heavy dew Bits of grass, and tiny seeds adhered to the leather A close look, like I'd had from the ground, disclosed the fragment of pine needle wedged between the sole and upper It protruded an eighth of an inch

"I'll take that shoe," says I, "as evidence that you were out there among the pine trees at the time you claim you were here at the house You must have been out there when Haig was shot!"

HE JUMPED at me This time I was ready I ducked inside the blow and smashed him in the stomach Abdul caught him or he would have gone down half-paralyzed for the moment I took that moment to grab up his leg and jerk off the shoe

Colson fought away from Abdul "Give me that shoe! I'll have you thrown off the grounds!"

I pulled the 38 on him

"You wanted to send Briggs after more whiskey and Professor Haig said there was plenty here,' I recalled "That was queer Now you get fighting mad because you can't drive to the gate. I wonder if you'd have driven after that scotch yourself, since Briggs wasn't around then You got his car keys some way Let's look around, I've got an idea"

Abdul's voice fell between us like the blade of a knife "Inshalla so be it!" The dark lean face now matched the fierce black eyes. I guessed that Abdul knew what was on my mind.

Lee Colson had a cornered, hunted look as he glared at the gun. He shivered as he met my gun He was pale as I herded him back to the car with the gun.

Tom Bryant looked inside at my order. "Nothing in here," he said.

"Look in the trunk"

We gathered behind the car as Bryant took the keys and unlocked the lid. As he started to lift it, Lee Colson bolted away with only one shoe on

"Let him go!" I called as Abdul started after him

We found Briggs The trunk space was big enough to hold the doubled body. Briggs had been slugged on the temple so hard the skull was crushed

"You knew this," I said to Abdul

He looked at me. "Only a fool sleeps when enemies are close My eyes were my sahib's eyes."

"You suspected Colson of being an enemy?"

"And Memsahib," Abdul said deliberately

"Mrs Haig?"

"Memsahib," Abdul said evenly, "hated the hunting of my sahib I have heard her anger in the tents and on the trail She wished him to stay at home She would not live in New York alone. She cried that the sahib was tired of her, that he wished to put her aside She promised that it would not happen while she lived. It was a time of unhappiness for the Sahib

"When Memsahib fell among the rocks and cried to all the doctors that she could not walk, Sahib Haig bowed his head and said 'The hunting is finished, Abdul, I will not leave her Stay in my service and we will see what time will do'"

"And time," I said, "didn't do much?"

"Here," said Abdul, "money was spent

like a rajah that Memsahib might have all happiness. Even to the bringing of her brother that Memsahib might have the pleasure of his company. And there was no happiness What can a strong man do before the tongue of a sickness upon her? The sahib was a dog in his own house And when there was an end to the money, he said: 'We will live poorly I will work Your brother will work and we will live If I die, there will be much money from insurance'"

"Heavy insurance? Plenty of money once more for Colson and his sister if Haig died?" I whistled softly, making a violent readjustment of my ideas. "He died," I said "It looked like the ape did it What a smooth idea That's why the ape was out That's why two guns were missing One gun for Ko ko to carry around and one for Colson to use and drop when he caught Haig close to Ko ko

"If Colson let Ko ko out deliberately," I said, "he must have been around close when I walked into the office and was hit Now that I think about it, how would an ape's paw gash my head so cleanly? Colson must have been there in the dark and slugged me before I saw what was happening. Then he left me there with the ape and got out."

THE music beyond the house had macabre gaiety as I talked The others were listening intently

"But what about Briggs?" I said "Colson wanted to get the body away before the police got here Why did he kill Briggs?"

"Briggs was to return," said Abdul, "and search your room, Sahib, for the young lady who was waiting It was known to them that you were a detective, brought by Memsahib to spy on the Sahib Haig and his secretary. I was to search the young lady's room

"We were to bring what writing we found to the garage. Briggs did not return Is it possible, Sahib, that while searching, he met the Sahib Colson and was killed because he had seen too much?"

"Not only possible, but probable," I said "And lack I came right into the middle of it Maybe Colson thought he'd killed me too, until he met me outside We weren't looking for divorce evidence We were told that Mrs Haig was a helpless invalid, afraid that her husband would kill her Did Haig have any idea of leaving his wife and marrying Miss Carrol?"

"Allah forgive me," said Abdul. "Am I a wise man to speak for my master, who is dead? But I think not, Sahib He did not know his wife could walk"

Walk?"

"I have seen her when she thought no one was looking Sahib It was the way of a woman who hated, to keep her man weak at her side while she made his life that of a dog"

None of us doubted Abdul Constance Haig could walk She hadn't been in danger from the man who had given years and his money to caring for her Yet she'd brought detectives in and built up a web of fake evidence against the man

Two detectives on the spot to swear what a rat Haig was Who would look past that and think about the insurance if Haig died? That was where I fully grasped the cold blooded, careful build up that had preceded Haig's murder

The big party tonight may have been part of the smoke screen Constance Haig must have known all evening what was happening No wonder she looked feverish She and her brother had almost pulled it off, with Mike Harris and Trixie Meehan covering for them. Only my stubbornness in returning after being fired and luck had switched the guilt.

I had time to think, *"What a pity Haig didn't know in time that she could walk!"* when we heard a terrified shout

(Please continue on page 126)

KILLER'S LUCK

By RAYMOND DRENNEN

Killing Wanda had unnerved him more than he'd thought it would.

Confessed-murderer Herbert Pettibone was so insignificant— they wouldn't even give him dying room.

THERE she was at Randolph's desk again, bending close to him, touching his shoulder lightly. From where he sat, Herbert Pettibone could see it all clearly, every move she made. Randolph was aware of her, all right. He was aware of her nearness, and of her red gold hair whispering against his face. But he didn't show it. She thought she was very clever, pretending to study the typed report she'd just brought in, laid on the desk in front of him.

Herbert Pettibone had seen Wanda's little act a hundred times these last three months, and each time something had shriveled inside him. Randolph had his desk on a raised platform at the head of the Accounting Department, just a few feet away from Herbert's. Wanda worked in the steno pool, but you'd think she was

Jack Randolph's private property, the way she hung around his desk!

Why couldn't Randolph see what she was doing to him? If only Herbert could tell him but Herbert knew he wouldn't understand Jack Randolph was stupid, but Herbert hated to see Wanda wreck Jack's life like she'd wrecked Herbert's. That was another reason Wanda Blake had to die!

Herbert wasn't even bitter any more, now that he'd decided to kill Wanda He was single and he could use his life any way he wanted to. Destroy it, if necessary. But Randolph couldn't. He was married Perhaps that was why Herbert felt so deeply about it. Herbert knew Grace Randolph, and they didn't come any finer

He had met Grace when she and Jack had come to borrow his revolver to go shooting.

"Why don't you come with us, Herb?" she'd said She'd called him Herb right off "Jack has told me so much about you, about how you held the department together practically single-handed while he was away. Jack depends on you so much, Herb. We'd love to have you come shooting with us"

Jack hadn't said anything like that, of course. He didn't realize how hard Herbert had slaved But it was nice Grace realized Perhaps it was just as well Herbert hadn't gone shooting with them, though he'd wanted to very much. Knowing Grace better would just make him feel that much worse about the whole thing, the way Wanda was taking Jack in.

Wanda was beautiful, there was no denying that. Herbert didn't blame Jack, except for being such a fool as not to see through Wanda She was shallow. The way she'd follow him out of the building at night and take his arm to the subway, forcing herself on him.

But she was just leading him on. Like she'd led Herbert on when he was acting head of the department. That was before Jack returned It was always the top guy she was after, Herbert thought sardonically. The one who could do the most for her.

If only Herbert hadn't fallen in love with her .

He'd had it out with her last night. He'd asked her point blank to marry him. She'd just looked at him, her red mouth pouting quizzically. She hadn't said anything, but Herbert had read her eyes.

You're so little, Herbert—so insignificant! her eyes said.

She'd used those words a lot with him. Oh, not to describe him. Wanda Blake was too clever for that She'd used them to describe other people. Herbert had always hated those words, because he *was* little. In a way, he knew deep in his heart that he *was* insignificant.

She had said it with her eyes She had taunted and spurned him, laughed at him with her eyes! Well, she would see. When he killed her, she would know, and the whole world would know that he wasn't insignificant! Herbert Pettibone was a person to be reckoned with, even though he was . he winced, remembering what the doctor had written on his paper . . too scrawny!

Herbert watched her now, straightening up back of Jack Randolph Her black dress was cut too low in front and he was sorry for a moment that Jack hadn't returned his revolver But then, it didn't make too much difference if her white skin was torn and maimed.

Herbert knew what he was going to use to kill her with. The letter knife on his desk was very good steel. With a little whetting, it would do very nicely.

She caught his eye, shot him a quick smile as she disappeared through the door into the steno room. Clammy sweat bubbled on his face and he averted his eyes hastily Jack Randolph was watching him too! Herbert forced himself to

breath deeply, because he knew he didn't have anything to fear

He wasn't going to run He wasn't trying to get away with murder That would cheat him of fulfillment After he killed Wanda, he was going to police headquarters and give himself up

Just like that

He was a little, insignificant, scrawny excuse of a man, they said Perhaps it was a little too subtle for them to really understand, but Herbert was going to get rid of Wanda Blake before she could hurt anyone else like she'd hurt him

She was trash Cheap, flashy, not worth his little fingernail And even though she laughed at him, and he knew all these things, she was in his blood Herbert Pettibone loved her

HERBERT didn't try to speak to her at quitting time He watched her daily at the elevator, waiting for Jack Randolph, scheming to get on the same elevator with him and make it appear as though it were a coincidence She was very clever, she thought, but to Herbert it was so obvious it was sickening He purposely held back, waiting for her to go down first He didn't want to talk to her Not until tonight Then it would be too late for talking

He slipped the letter knife into his coat pocket and, on his way to his room, he stopped in a hardware store and bought a small oilstone When he got to his room, he fixed himself a drink Herbert didn't drink as a rule, but he kept a bottle in case anyone ever dropped in Tonight was special Tonight was the night he himself would stop living They couldn't hurt him after that

It was funny, in a way, because the police would go through the motions of trying him and sending him to prison In New York, they electrocute you to make you die, but he would already be dead He knew that when he plunged the blade into Wanda Blake, he, Herbert Pettibone, would die with her It would be, in a deep sense, real achievement. A real triumph!

It was eight thirty now, and the knife was sharp He put on his coat and started for her apartment Half way there, he put his hand in his pocket and found he'd absentmindedly carried the oilstone with him He tossed it into an ashcan, thinking how funny it would be if he had brought the oilstone but left the knife at home He felt of it in his pocket and somehow it didn't feel so funny.

No one saw him walk into Wanda's apartment house and up the one flight of steps. He drummed with his fingernails, as he always did, and when she opened the door, she looked at him curiously, then opened it wider and said how glad she was that he'd come

He laughed at her then, the first time he'd ever laughed at her Then her eyes widened in horror as he pulled the letter knife out of his pocket and lunged it into her breast. He stared at her as she slipped to the floor, an incredible dryness coming to his throat .

Suddenly he felt dizzy, seeing her lying there at his feet, the knife sticking up and blood coming out and running down into her dress She didn't look at all like he'd thought she would He was trembling violently and felt as though something were stifling him Suddenly he wanted to cry She looked so pathetic

He whirled blindly, running out of the apartment, down the stairway. In the lobby, he bumped into someone and the force of the collision knocked him down. He felt someone pulling on his arm, helping him to his feet For a minute, he stared dazedly, realizing it was Jack Randolph Frantically, he jerked himself free and ran out

He walked for hours, it seemed, trying to collect his wits Killing Wanda had

(Please continue on page 123)

PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

I swung the left hand, like a stone on the end of a string.

TRI-KILL CUTIE

Brutal racket-master Sonny and his two musclemen were Johnny's secret shooting gallery— until Sonny's gal Mandy . . . started back-firing.

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

CHAPTER ONE

Lethal Momento

SONNY sat there on the end of the brass bed, half-grinning like a guy waiting for the payoff on a practical joke. The bathroom door was open. When the roar of the shower stopped, Sonny lost his grin and gave me a quick nod.

I leaned across the pillows and put my thumb on the knob of the bedside radio. It was all warmed up and turned to a

station, but the volume was cut all the way back

When Big Al appeared in the bathroom doorway he had a blue towel over his head, flapping over his face, the thick fingers digging through the towel into his scalp, drying that curly blond hair.

I thumbed the volume up high and it was the old Basie recording of "My Buddy," the horn part with that wonderful crisp piano running in and out of the melody like a squirrel going up through the branches of a tree

Big Al yanked the towel down Sonny had the Woodsman already raised He shot Big Al in the heart The twenty-two slug made a dark hole I looked at Big Al, feeling the way you do sometimes at a bull fight after the sword is in. The bull is on his feet and the dark mind is still ticking over, but something's wrong

I wanted him to look at me instead of at Sonny. I wanted him to swing his eyes over and maybe guess, in that last second, just why it had happened to him But he stared right at Sonny as if his mind hadn't caught up with the fact of death yet The lips pulled back in a grin that was somehow shy and boyish and apologetic.

"Guys, I . . ." That was as far as it went. The strained muscles went soft and he sat down hard on his heels, balanced in a squatting position with his chin on his chest for a twentieth part of a second before slopping over against the door frame and then coming forward, his face and chest sliding along the floor so that he ended up stretched out flat, his head almost under the brass end of the bed, the blue towel as neat under him as though somebody had spread it there

The Count was handling a solo piano, as crisp as celery. I found out that I still had my thumb on the radio dial and I pulled the volume down a little Sonny stood up, fiddled with the safety on the Woodsman, then tucked it inside his belt, the long barrel down the front of his right thigh.

We had waited around the corner of the hallway until we heard the shower start to roar When I had shoved the cold chisel in by the lock bolt and pried, it hadn't made much of a noise.

The shower had made the room hot My hands were sweating inside the rubber gloves Sonny started on the bureau and I went through the stuff he piled on the table near the chair Without taking time to count it, I figured the wallet at better than four hundred, mostly in small stuff Big Al liked to have a wallet look and feel fat

I waved the wad of bills at Sonny. He smiled without mirth In the back of the wallet I found a familiar thing, a wicked-looking little chunk of steel It was Big Al's story According to him, he had been driving a six by six just outside of Bastogne The bomb fragment had come through the windshield, drawn one drop of blood from the lobe of his right ear and then clunked into a bag of tire chains behind him so hard that the prints of the chains were visible on the evil little fragment

I bounced it up and down in my hand. The announcer was telling us that for the best deal on furniture, Seebold's was the place to go He yelped every word and I wondered if Seebold himself was standing behind the guy.

While Sonny was still working on the bureau, I took the bed Before I finished the bed, Sonny was pulling down the shades to see if what we were looking for was rolled up in them I had a little problem of my own I didn't know which was going to look the best to have Sonny find it, or to find it myself I had the edge on him. I knew where it was

Sonny grunted with annoyance when he finished the shades He went into the bathroom. I wondered if I had hid it too good To make it look good, I took the

one picture off the wall and tore out the backing Then I took the calendar off the wall. Courtesy of Kawalski's Towing Service. Damsels with the critical areas concealed by floating scarves and sea shells and birds flying by.

It was May. I took it in to Sonny and showed him how what we wanted had been taped to the back of November. He tore the envelope open, pulled out the two negatives and the four prints, two of each He checked the negatives by holding them up against the mid morning light coming in the opaque bathroom window.

His hand was steady as he held them up. Sonny is blonder than Big Al He looks like one of those little grooms on top of a wedding cake. He so seldom shows any expression, and he moves in such an angular uncoordinated way, that you expect to see a hole under his arm to stick the key in and wind him up.

He took out the lighter and lit the corner of the pictures They made a stink in the small bathroom He kept turning them so the flame would get the whole business The flame blistered the thumb of the rubber glove That stank too. He crumpled the ashes, dropped them in the john and flushed it. They swirled and went down with a sucking noise.

We went back out of the bathroom, stepping over Big Al's legs Al's alarm clock said that it was fifteen minutes after ten

Sonny said, "Wait a minute." He took the alarm clock and set it for eight o'clock and pulled the plunger out. It was a fool trick, the kind Sonny enjoys. He put it on the floor so that it almost touched Big Al's ear "Rise and shine," he said softly. "Grab them socks, boy." He stepped back, "Let's go, Doyle."

We peeled the gloves off in the hallway as we were heading for the stairs Sonny stood and looked down the two flights. He motioned me to the front window. I looked out

Across the narrow street, a purple dry-cleaning truck was parked. A guy came out of the house with clothes over his arm He got into the truck and drove away A little kid with saggy pants was throwing sticks at a fat dog tied to a broken porch railing. He wasn't hitting him but the dog was nervous.

"Okay," I said, walking back. We went down the stairs together, Sonny two steps ahead When we got in the hallway, we took another look outside. Sonny went first. I followed twenty feet behind him and caught up to him The kid finally hit the dog and it growled as though its heart wasn't in it.

The gray coupe was parked in the free lot across from the new shopping center We went into the lot and got into the car and drove away. Sonny drove. When he had to wait for a light on Carroll Street, he whistled tunelessly. It took me a little while to figure out that "My Bud dy" had stuck in his mind and that was what he was attempting

He broke off and said, "Why do they try to get too smart, Doyle?"

"They start thinking they can handle it as well as you, maybe."

"By now they should know. Al should have known When I found him he was one scared guy. AWOL in Paris with the M.P.'s making a big drive. I needed more muscles in the outfit. He worked in nice."

"Like I did?" I asked quietly.

"Like you did, Doyle. Just like you did." He laughed.

WE WENT out to the end of Carroll Street, turned left under the underpass and hit the new Speedway. It was only fifteen minutes from there out to the turnoff to the Mad Hatter, Sonny's place. We parked in back and went in through the kitchens The kitchen help didn't report until four in the after

noon We went into the big deserted dining room Sonny went on through the bar without a word I heard him going up the stairs to his apartment

I stood and looked at the band platform The chairs had that look of undertaker's chairs that stand near a coffin The piano grinned with yellow-white teeth The string-bass case lay flat on its back behind the chairs, a cheap coffin for a fat child

My heels sounded loud on the polished floor as I crossed to the platform, stepped up onto it, brushing by the tilted meaningless metal face of the singer's mike

I sat down and thought of Big Al For a long time I massaged my left hand, that broken twisted thing that serves for a hand after the knuckles have been smashed with seven measured blows with the butt of a Colt 45 Army issue I sat in the stillness and thought of Big Al

As I was thinking of him the headache started to come back I had a hunch it would come back today With that left hand I can span four keys, no more There's just enough left in the index, the ring and the little fingers so I can work out the simplest bass I played it soft, first that old Basie, that "My Buddy," and then I took it into that old nursery rhyme—about the three little Indians

The headache was sharpening I fought back at it by using that clubbed left hand in the best boogie beat I could get out of it, turning the one little, two little, three little Indians' into three hot little redskins

It was the helpful one with the X ray prints who fixed it so I could visualize the headaches Before he came around with his professional manner, I had thought of them in terms of light

A little weak green light bulb that starts to flicker inside your head and then gets brighter and sharper and harder and brighter until you're panting and you got to let your mouth open to let the light shine out and it comes out of your ears and there's nothing you can see on account of that hard green light coming into your eyes from the back

But that jerk with the X-rays. He fixed me He showed me the shape of it He pointed it out with a new yellow lead pencil Funny how some things get pasted to your memory and you can't peel them off On the lead pencil it said in red printing, *Fisher For Flowers*

I could see the misty bone outline of my skull He showed me the little devil right in the middle About an inch and a quarter long, no bigger around than the lead from a pencil except near the top of it where there was a wider place, rough along the side Right inside my head, pointing straight up and down Big Al could keep his little keepsake in his wallet Mine was between my ears, behind my eyes.

"Even if they'd found that at the general hospital, Doyle," he said, "there's nothing they could have done about it. You're a lucky soldier That sliver of steel missed anything big enough to kill you through hemmorhage"

"I'm lucky all right" I told him.

"It's too deep, and too delicately placed You've got to live with it, Doyle"

"I've lived with it for five years without knowing it was there, Doc.'

He was the kind who hated to be called 'Doc'. So that's all I called him

"You've come out of it now, Doyle. As far as we can tell there's been a very slow reabsorption of the clots so that—"

"So that I'm no longer nuts, Doc? Why not just say it?"

He frowned "I'm trying to help you, Doyle You should have all the facts You can be released if you wish You can stay here You'll never be rid of the headaches You may live to be ninety. A jolt may shift that sliver so that you'll die tomorrow You'll be drawing a hundred percent disability.

"We can't give you a blanket prescription to deaden the pain of those headaches If you stay here, we can treat you each time they come on It's a nice life, you know Books and movies and work snops "

"Don't try to sell it to me, Doc "

"I m not trying to sell you anything Readjustment for you will be very difficult You were irrational for four full years, Doyle The world has changed a lot "

I was sitting on my bed in the familar bathrobe and pajamas I looked at him but I wasn't seeing him I was seeing Sonny and Big Al and Skipworth

"I've got some unfinished business, Doc "

"Important enough to have to stand that pain without help?"

"Yes, Doc That important "

So they let me go I went right to Ridge City and the train wheels said, all the way,*"Be there, Sonny Be there, Sonny Be there, Sonny "*

I didn't want anybody else to have gotten to him Big Al and Skipworth weren't quite as important I didn't want Leavenworth to have him I wanted him clean and clear and he was I'd never seen his town Ridge City before I remembered the night in the cellar in Paris when he said

"The suckers'll keep running Doyle. Not this baby When the market is shot, I'm going to get clean It isn't tough They aren't checking too close All you need is the hospital records to show you had a good reason for being out of touch I'll fix you up and I'll fix up Big Al and Skipworth The rest of these joes we're using will be a nice present to the M.P.'s"

But then he didn't have to fix me up The sliver fixed me up When they came through us at the Bulge, Big Al and I were running out a truck of PX stuff, carrying forged trip tickets. They yanked us out of the truck and gave us carbines I remember being close to an M-4 tank when the world blew up and I woke up rational better than four years later

The doc figured it out He figured that the tank took a direct hit from an 88 and what I had in my head was a sliver of armor plate It saved Sonny the job of faking my papers.

Now when the headaches came it wasn't a green light any more It was that sliver, ugly like it looked in the X rays. It would quiver a little. I tried to keep my hands going on the piano keys as it got rougher The sliver began to wiggle like a fish The music went out of me

From far off, I could hear my right hand on the keys, doing those first three notes of the "Moonlight Sonata", over and over and over again, faster and faster. I felt my mouth sag open Vision was gone That damn sliver was spinning end for end, tearing my head to bits

THEN the world tipped and I was slumped with my face against the keys, every inch of me sticky with sweat, breathing like I'd run a long, long way. The needle was still again, hanging silent in the brain jelly, laughing It always laughed after it was through with its crazy dance.

I rolled my face from side to side, and some of the piano keys spoke softly. Fingers touched my shoulder lightly and I could smell the perfume she wore, the perfume that always makes me think of the black panthers I saw when I was a kid

"Bad one, Johnny?' she asked gently.

I put my hands against the key lid and pushed. My breath was slowing When I was sitting up again on the stool it took an extra effort to turn my head and lift it so that I could look up at her Sonny's girl. Mandy Powers A big bold cut girl with a body for statues and tan eyes that

never seem to blink and hair of the unforgettable brightness of that first brand new penny you earned all by yourself when you were five

"A big buster," I said "A skyrocket job."

"I heard you yelling I was way down by the river bank. I came running Don't ask me why I don't like to watch it."

She wore tailored navy slacks and a man's plaid wool shirt, too big for her except where it was too small At night she would put on one of the metallic strapless jobs she calls her 'spray gun' wardrobe, and her eyes would rove and her throat would throb, with the mike close to the wide lips, and the sculptor's body moving just enough, and the voice like fingers in your hair—turning the thread bare words of Tin Pan Alley into double, triple and quadruple meanings that turned back the clock for the old ones and turned it ahead for the ones still wet behind the ears

A hell of a lot of woman

I stood up before I should have When I swayed toward her, she caught me strongly, one hand on my left elbow, the other at the armpit Her eyes looked up at me, deeply concerned "Bed, Johnny," she said

"You're the boss."

I was okay so she let go of me, letting one hand slide down to my wrist She looked at that left hand of mine I watched her face They all show it The eyes narrowing or turning away quickly, or the lips compressing, or the throat working as they swallow.

Not Mandy. I don't know why she did it Probably she didn't, either. She picked up the bad hand and held it against her soft cheek, looking up at me

"Old Johnny," she said

I turned away because there were tears with no reason She walked with me to the door of my room in the wing When I opened the door, she brushed by me, walked over with quick steps and pulled the blind cords so that the room was dark

It would have been all right if a breeze hadn't swung my door slowly shut so that it latched very gently She stood looking at me, her face solemn in the half light

It hit us like a full glass of calvados.

I pulled her close to me, tilted her face up

"Old Johnny," she whispered, barely moving her lips.

I thought of all of it Her and Sonny One gone Two to go This stank This was misery I spoke loud and flat "What will Sonny think, honey?"

For a moment there was more shock than anger in her "No, Johnny! Not like that! This isn't like that!"

"Of course not," I said mockingly

She slapped me hard She shut the door behind her without a sound

Check off one Mandy Powers I tried to remember the last time I'd kissed a woman Then I remembered her A little blonde whose breath had smelled of sour wine and who kept calling me Charlie.

When the pain had settled down so that it was merely a dullness, I went over to the bureau and took a bottle out of the bottom drawer You drown women in bottles Mandy needed a fast drowning There was too much to do, and no time I was too eager I poured it down too fast, but the memory of Mandy was in my fingertips and on my lips I fell into sleep like a body pushed out of a high window

CHAPTER TWO

A Wreath for Skip

MAYBE it was Big Al's death that did it I don't know. The dream came the old recurrent dream clear and hard and vivid and

true Sergeant Johnny Doyle again, with two good hands and no steel in his head

Johnny Doyle who had played piano with Karby and Luttigan and Sands, Doyle the sap who had decided that entertaining the troops was a hell of a way to fight a war, went overseas as a casual replacement and ended up in QM supply, stationed in Paris, working in the warehouses packed to the roof with stuff worth a million on the black market

Then this Doyle sap had gotten so lonesome for a piano, he got himself drunk When he woke up he was in Sonny Bolender's place, and the needle holes in Doyle's arms were good enough reason for the three weeks' AWOL That's the way they put you behind the eight ball—keeping you away from your outfit for three weeks, then telling you that since you are due for the stockade anyway, you might as well go whole-hog, stay AWOL, join the black market outfit and clean up

You were prize meat for Sonny Bo lender, because you knew the warehouse ropes He told you the plan They were going to take a load of trucks in, bold as brass, load up and get out, shooting if they had to.

Big brave Johnny Doyle. You laughed at Sonny. That was bad. You told the three of them in that room with you that they could go to hell Sonny and Big Al and Skipworth. But you didn't know the names then, of course

A stone floor and a heavy wooden table and a canvas cot No windows Big Al and Skipworth took you over to the table and Skipworth held you around the middle while Big Al pinned your left arm to the table. That's where the dream always started, the moment Sonny said meaningfully:

"Drunk as a skunk and you were still playing hot piano when we grabbed you Ever see a one handed piano player?"

In the books it was always a bluff. In the books the hero gives a tight-lipped smile, throws Skipworth over his head, knocks out Big Al with one punch and takes the 45 away from Sonny. Then fadeout with girl and music and sunset

But the script went wrong. You closed the left hand into a fist just as the bitter butt of the 45 smashed down Something went wrong with Sonny's face and his eyes. You could see that—even pain-blinded The second smash hurt like a wood rasp across decayed teeth

You faded down through the stone floor into softness and warmth -awakened in an unknown alley in a cold rain. You buttoned the ruined hand inside your shirt and reported back to the unit.

They listened to you in the hospital and nodded and said, even with the disbelief showing in their eyes, that it was too bad and they were sorry and you're out of the army now, boy You're all through

They were going to take off the hand, but first they tried to put it back together. A good trick. You were healthy. They put a cast on you and marked you for the boat Instead you went off looking for those three.

You found them after two weeks, and convinced them that you had "smartened up" To prove it, you gave Sonny all he needed to pull the warehouse job. Your end came out to five greasy hundred pound notes

Sonny suspected you for a long time. You knew that inside you were just as crazy as he was, but in a different way. You wanted the easy dough You wanted to kill him, and Big Al, and Skipworth. When you thought the cast was ready to come off, you took it off Sonny said it was a hell of a looking hand. You grinned into his eyes and said·

"No hard feelings, fella."

Big Al was going to be first, when the two of you went out with the truck. All

planned. That was the first time they gave you a gun At the right spot on the trip you were going to stand him up, blow him up . . . But the German Army took over

A slight interruption Five years and two months and eighteen days, to be exact. Pardon me, Al You see, I was crazy for a few years there Sorry I didn't get around to you sooner Sorry you had the extra five years, two months and eighteen days of eating, drinking feeling your heart beat, using those big hard muscles that pinned my arm down

The same old dream kept awakening me The last time it wasn't the dream It was footsteps in the dark room Outside it was night I clicked on the bed lamp and saw Skipworth pawing for the light switch, the one beside the door

He grinned over at me, closed the door, came over and sat on the end of the bed. I took one of his cigarettes and he held the match. In Paris, Skipworth was a lean dark boy with hollow cheeks Now he has cheeks like a squirrel and a small black mustache. He's sleek like a cat

"How was it, Johnny?"

I made a circle of my fingers "Pure silk Full fashioned. Clear going in and clear coming away He had the shots, all right "

"The damn fool," Skipworth said. "You can't cross Sonny."

"How are we so far?"

"It was in the evening papers Alarm Clock Murder, yet Sonny went right on down to headquarters as soon as he saw it. The old act You gotta find out who killed muh pal He isn't back yet Detective Lieutenant Goldwine is out at the bar waiting to talk to you."

"Why me?"

"Don't think you're special, Johnny. He's already talked to me and Mandy. Take your time getting dressed, boy He's happy out there."

"When did they find the body?"

"Four o'clock. Al had a date with that high-pressure chick of his. She went around to see what was keeping him I'll give her three days to cry her eyes out and get over it Then I'm taking over Sonny's orders He thinks maybe Al give her a couple prints You never can tell."

He went out I took a quick shower in my small private bath and put on the newest dark gray suit It was six thirty The cocktail crowd would be just past its peak I combed my hair and looked at the stranger's face in the mirror

It still seemed incredible that the face and body had gone on sleeping, waking, moving There were no memories of those years Nothing Like somebody borrowed your face, used it and then returned it, slightly the worse for wear Not a bad face—or a good one Too long, with all the breadth across the cheekbones, the jaw narrow. Not at all a face of vengeance, which it was

HE WAS a spidery little man and he sat at a bar stool around the end of the bar, his elbows out, his narrow shoulders slumped, his chin almost on the edge of the highball glass His furry dark suit had that somewhat glassy look that comes from hard wear. His pale eyes were very subtly out of track, so that he gave the impression of always looking just beyond you

The stool next to him was full, so we moved over to a table Franz brought me the usual Gibson when he brought the lieutenant's glass over

"Tough to lose a good pal, eh, Doyle?" His voice had a dry rusty sound

"Not such a pal," I said "I like my friends a little brighter for a long haul."

"You've been here how long?"

"Five months Nearly six, lieutenant "

"You worked in fast, didn't you?"

"Old war buddies. Didn't Sonny tell you?"

"You wouldn't want to tell me what

you do here for Sonny, would you?"

"Why not? I book in the acts, check the service, keep an eye on the kitchens, work with the accountant, handle the payroll It's a job."

"A nice job for a guy with no previous experience, Doyle "

"Nothing's too tough if you work at it, Lieutenant "

"Neither of us was born yesterday, Doyle " He looked down into his glass as though there were a bug in the bottom of it "Sonny's cute He was just a runner for Masserelli when the army snagged him Now Masserelli seems to be semi-retired with Sonny Bolender back in town

"Sonny's got the liquor licenses, the books, the floating games, the snow birds and half the wards of the city in his pocket. This place is a hobby with him. You rent a safety deposit box What do you keep in it? Your summer socks?"

"Get an order and you can open it, Lieutenant."

"You don't seem like the type, Doyle Know what I mean?'

"What's this got to do with Big Al?"

He finished his drink and stood up. "Big Al? He's dead, isn't he?"

He carefully counted out seventy five cents for his drink and added a dime "See you around, Doyle " He went out like a dusty little crow getting out of a cage full of parrots

I sat there with the drink in front of me, not liking any part of it. I was certain that Detective Lieutenant Goldwine meant to leave me just as jumpy as he could And he'd done a very good job

The lull pianist was murdering a pop tune. Francey, the little blonde who passes the tidbit tray in the lounge bar came over with her tray. "One for Johnny," she said, "Try one of them little fish."

"One of *those* little fish, Francey."

She arched her back "I should have to know grammar?" As I took the little fish she recommended—she leaned over. Her voice was barely audible "Our canary had Franz take her up a bottle It ain't like her."

"Maybe she wants to wash her hair "

"In gin?"

"Thanks Francey. I'll take a look."

I went up She was in her own room "C'min," she yelled when I knocked She hadn't changed A sheaf of the coppery hair fell across one eye She smoothed it back with her hand and stared at me owlishly The bottle was beside her, on the floor A pint was gone

"How the hell do you expect to sing?" I demanded

"Go to hell, Johnny," she said tonelessly "I'm quitting."

I went into her bath and turned the shower on I went back and started to say, "Get in that shower before " I broke it off Sonny was standing just inside the door

"I o, Sonny, y'ole beast Say good-by to the canary, kid Lil Mandy's blowing the joint, soon as she packs up "

He kicked the door shut He reached her in three long strides, yanked her up by the front of the shirt and hit her so hard with the heel of his hand that she fell sideways out of his grip She landed on her hands and knees. I saw the look in his eyes that I'd seen a long time ago in Paris

I pulled him away from her. He looked at me and through me, but he didn't know me I was just an object in his way. Slowly his eyes lost that look.

He said, "Thanks, Johnny."

"She can't work tonight "

"Anything I hate it's a female lush Straighten her out, Johnny.' He went out with that jerky, uncoordinated walk.

I got her up from the floor The left side of her face was beginning to discolor. She had trouble with her breathing She lay looking up at the ceiling, and her face was dead and far away. No more li-

quor, no effect left Her drunk was over.

"A doctor might be a good idea"

"I'm all right," she said tonelessly

"There could be internal injuries, Mandy."

"I'm a big strong girl"

She rolled her head toward me and her mouth twisted "This is a big day, Johnny Educational No man ever hit me before"

"You ought to get out of here, Mandy. You ought to leave, as soon as you can. Tonight maybe"

"I can think about it, but I'll never leave. You know it and I know it I could leave but he'd bring me back Wherever I went, he'd bring me back"

"Take it easy tonight I'll have Mike use that guy in the band for a vocal, the kid that plays the tram"

"I'll be all right. I ll work ton ght."

"Don't be a damn fool!"

"I'll work tonight That's what I'm getting paid for, isn t it?"

I went down and over into the west wing. It was seven o'clock. Old Tim had uncovered the tables I spun one of the wheels as I went back to where Larry was breaking open the free bar in the casino. I used my keys and opened the low cabinet and took out three bowls of dice for the three crap tal les, a box of new decks for the twenty-one tables.

We open the casino at eight It's Skipworth's baby. A good-sized layout Three pit bosses, seven stick men, four girl dealers, plus two men on the bar, two at the cashier's cage, and two at the door It's all straight That is where Sonny is smart The crooked stuff is all in the houses scattered around Ridge City, where his connection is less well known

Skipworth came in I had just finished laying out the merchandise I took one of his cigarettes "How did it go with Goldy?" he asked

"A very shrewd little guy, I'd say."

"He's Mr Trouble He can't be fixed and he can't be fired One of those He's a worker"

"Skip, why did Big Al take that place in town?"

"So the cookie could come see him It was handier That was his story. But I guess he felt safer there as long as he was planning to cross Sonny."

"I don t see how those pictures would bother Sonny so much"

Skip smoothed down the small black mustache with his thumb knuckle "Get smart, Johnny That was federal heat. You can't buck that"

I shrugged and went back into the club proper Everything was pretty quiet during the seven-to-eight lull I went out into the kitchens, selected a small steak and had them fix it up for me

Skip was the next problem I think better while I'm eating I sat in a corner of the big kitchen at a small table and worked on my steak Skip was my boy. A nice little wreath for Skip The coffin would have silverplate handles I wondered if the black mustache would keep growing, afterward

CHAPTER THREE

Doublecross Partners

BECAUSE it was "pickup' day, I set my alarm for nine. Six hours isn't enough It took a long cold shower to finish the rest of the wake up job When I went to Skip's room he was already up He had shaved and he was carefully trimming the black mustache.

After breakfast Skip got at the wheel of the big sedan, the one we used on this special day once a week I sat beside him with the brown zipper bag between my feet and the two specialists sat in back Sonny arranged the licenses for the guns Mine was uncomfortable, as always, in the shoulder holster

The bag at my feet contained the sheafs

of bills taken in at the casino during the week over and above the seventy thousand working capital kept in the big bank-type vault in the cellars under the club It had been a fair week and the deposit was a little over thirty-three thousand There are nine stops on the pickup route When we left the last one the bag between my feet contained a little better than a hundred and twenty thousand

I kicked the bag "Let's go to Mexico, Skip."

"Sure, sure," he said sourly I bent over and dug around in the bag and picked out the brown envelope prepared once a week for the grease list. Sonny has arranged it efficiently We parked across from the courthouse One of the specialists went in with me, as always It was an oak paneled office on the second floor.

The girl at the desk glanced up, gave us the tight weekly smile and said, "You can go right in "

We went in. I tossed the envelope on the desk, in front of the puffy old man with the rimless glasses who looks somewhat like the public idea of the kindly old family doctor He never varied the routine. He slid it into his top desk drawer and flipped open the fancy cigar box. I took two and handed one to the specialist.

"Looks like a nice warm month," he said

"Warm for May," I said.

Then he varied the routine "Very unfortunate, about your friend "

"Those things happen,' I said

"Tell Mr B that we'll inconvenience him as little as possible "

"He's anxious to know, too."

"These things are bad for business. The public gets upset Pressure on the police and the District Attorney's office. We'd hate to think Mr. B was having any . . ah serious competition."

"Nothing he can't handle," I said.

"Good day, gentlemen."

"Good day, Mr. Commissioner."

We left The young lady gave us a measured smile. We went down the stairs smoking the cigars It was beginning to take a misty shape in my mind, how to do it to Skip It was beginning to look possible

At the bank, it was Skip's turn. He took the bag in The money reported for tax purposes was deposited in the corporation account Then he went down to the safety deposit box section That was a blind When he came out, the bag was empty, but Skip, I knew, was heavier around the middle The specialits weren't in on it

If the pressure hit them, they could lead the law to a big empty box. Skip took the box into the cubicle each week alone while he transferred dough to the big belt around his middle That's as far as I had gone.

What happened to it from there was something they had not yet let me in on I knew it was never any less than thirty thousand A million and a half a year It would be nice to find out where it was stashed Sonny stashed it personally. I knew that much

Skip got back behind the wheel. "That must be a nice full box," I said.

"It sure is."

The Sonny system. Let the guy believe he's all the way in. But keep him fooled They were trusting me just so far When I didn't turn around to look into the back seat, I could almost imagine Big Al sitting back there between the two specialists

I started working out the details of the plan They had to work out exactly right. They had to work out as well as the plan I tailored to Big Al. If he hadn't been a camera bug, it wouldn't have panned out the way it did

Sonny, for a very fat fee, took the risk of hiding one very hot citizen for three days, until transportation out of the

country could be arranged. The federal government was eager to ask the hot citizen some very pointed questions I sneaked one of Al's cameras out of his room and got two decent shots of Sonny talking to the man, in the sunlight behind the club on a cold April day.

The pictures would have meant nothing were it not for the car beyond them, the license plates, brand new, just issued, showing the date of the picture, according to courthouse records, could be no earlier than April tenth And that was when the heat was at its greatest, all over the front pages of the newspapers.

I sent them to be developed at a place I read about in a magazine ad Two prints of each, praying that the guy who made the prints wouldn't identify the wanted man from the newspaper pictures. I gave my name as Albert Hoaglund, Big Al's right name, and then got up first to get the mail at the Mad Hatter every morning until they came.

When they did, I steamed open the envelope and checked. They were all right. I re sealed it and took it to Sonny. I told him I didn't want to be a snitch I told him I'd seen Big Al using his camera on the hot stranger We steamed it open The pictures scared the hell out of Sonny I gave him advice Let Big Al get them and see what he would do. We re-sealed the envelope After I left Sonny, I opened it for the third time, took out the pictures and put in some routine advertising for cameras that I'd picked out of Big Al's wastebasket. Naturally Al said nothing. I visited him in his room and fastened the pictures to the back of the calendar.

It was easy because Sonny had given me the job of sticking with Big Al to see what moves he made I reported to Sonny that I believed Big Al had hidden them somewhere in his room After that it didn't make any difference whether Sonny gave Big Al a chance to talk or not. The pictures would be proof enough against Big Al when Sonny was judge and jury and chief executioner

It worked only because Sonny was willing to believe that other minds would work as deviously as his own

Now I had the problem of Skipworth.

I WORKED on it on the way back out to the club, with Skip sitting beside me driving the car He was sitting there dead, and he didn't know it The empty brown bag was on the seat between us.

I thought of him being dead, and I thought of the lost years. It gave me that sudden anticipatory feeling that another headache was on the way. The V.A psychiatrist had been a young fellow named Scherta Like all of them he expected you to lay yourself open, spread everything out for him to paw and probe

I went along with him far enough to try and make him believe I'd spilled everything But he was tough to fool During the last interview, he said, "Doyle, this is not psychiatrist to patient This is man to man Don't get to thinking of yourself as an instrument of fate. Don't get an avenger complex."

"Gosh, I don't know what you mean!"

"Just remember that with a little care you can have a happy and useful life. Avoid emotional strain. You've been a musician Your pension will carry you while you go to school, while you learn more about harmony and composition"

"I'm not interested in music."

"You haven't fooled me, Doyle."

"Have I been trying to?"

They had to let me go

When we got back to the Mad Hatter, Skipworth went right on up to report to Sonny and to turn over the dough they didn t know he had held out. I had coffee in the kitchen and then went out behind the garages and down across the sloping brambly field to the river bank

Mandy was there. She sat on a flat

rock under a willow by the river's edge. Last night she had sung, with the makeup so thick it had covered the discoloration. This morning the copper hair was in two braids, tied at the end with yarn. Her only makeup was lipstick. The swelling had gone down, but the blue-purple patch had spread up along her cheek to the eye. The flesh under her eye was blue yellow and puffed.

She looked at me. "I ran into a door," she said.

I stood and looked down at her. "You've got to get out."

"How touching. It doesn't jibe with that tender little scene we had yesterday, Johnny."

"Forget that. You've got to get out of here. If you haven't got money, I'll stake you. You've got to get away from here." My voice was unexpectedly thick.

"Ah, we will flee together," she said mockingly.

"I don't want to see you again. I just want you away from here, Mandy."

I went down onto one knee beside the stone where she sat. The earth was so damp I could feel it through the fabric of my trousers.

It was one of those endless and unforgettable moments. We stared into each other's eyes and I let her read too much.

"Why did you do that to me yesterday, Johnny?"

I looked away from her, out at the oily black water of the river. "Because there's nothing in it for us. There can't be."

"That was your way of brushing me off." Her tone was very gentle.

"Yes."

She reached out and her fingers wrapped warm around my wrist. "I think you'd better tell me, Johnny. I think you have a lot to tell me."

I don't know how long it took. Maybe an hour. I told her all of it and what I had to do. When I finished, she was quiet for a long time. Finally, she sighed.

"You're sick, Johnny."

"Lord, you sound like Scherta!"

"Johnny, I could take care of you. We could both go away from here. We could make you well again."

"Not now, honey. Not with one dead and two to go. That's why you've got to get out of here. There's trouble coming. Bad trouble. Go away, honey. Run."

"Nothing I can say or do will make you give it up?"

"Nothing, nothing."

She was silent for a long time. Then she sighed. A long deep sigh of commitment. "You don't leave me much choice, Johnny."

"What do you mean?"

"I love you. I guess it's been growing for a long time. It's strong, Johnny. Terribly strong. I can't leave you, and you won't stop this crazy plan, so I'm going to stay and I'm going to help you."

"I can't let you do that!"

"Johnny, darling, you can't stop me."

"Why should you try to—"

"It'll be easier for you if I help you. When it's all done, we can go away together. We can help you get well again."

"When they're dead, I'll be well."

"You framed Al so that Sonny killed him. You say you want to do the same thing with Skip. But what about Sonny?"

My hands tightened, along with my voice. "He's for me, honey. He's mine. He's got to know it when the time comes."

"I can't let you do that. They'll get you, Johnny. They'll take you and they'll kill you or put you in prison for all the rest of your life."

"Not if we're smart." I had begun to accept her, to figure on how I could use her.

Then I kissed her. I guess there was fright in us. I guess we both knew, in spite of my confident talk, that we

wouldn't really get away with it. Maybe you always know, in your heart, when a thing isn't going to work out

Then she told me about her life She didn't look at me while she told me and her lips didn't move much with the words. She'd been a three year guest of the state at eighteen until twenty-one She said she was a blonde, that the copper hair was an expert dye job, that Sonny's hold over her was the knowledge of her record.

I knew, as she talked, that she hated Sonny and that deep inside she would be glad to help me kill him We were a pair of misfits and we sat on the river bank Once, though it was warm, she shivered so badly that I had to hold her tight.

WE WENT over my plan for Skipworth We talked it out. She had some good ideas She added one little item that I hadn't even thought about We'd need a stake—later she said. So why not do a good job of stashing the contents of the brown bag? It made sense.

The mechanics of the plan depended on handling it in such a way that it would look as though Skip was the only guy who could possibly have pulled the switch It had to look at first like a complete mystery. Then each little clue that turned up would have to look like Skip had done it

Most of all, it depended on having the duplicate brown bag in exactly the right place at exactly the right time

We wanted to be ready for the switch at the next weekly pickup If we weren't ready, or if anything went sour, we could hold it over for the following week.

I looked at her It seemed odd When I awakened that morning, I was all alone in this thing Now there were two of us. It seemed funny that she could so quickly adjust herself to killing two people.

We went back up to the place, and it happened that the four of us ate lunch together—something that rarely happened Maybe it should have been a strained awkward lunch It wasn't Sonny seemed to be afraid that Mandy would be holding a grudge

When she didn't act like it, kidding and laughing with us, he relaxed too He was always pretty happy after we'd made the pickup and payoff anyway I wondered where he was hiding the money. I wondered if even Skip knew.

That afternoon I had to go down and lay in some sides of triple A beef for our walk in cooler The jacket Skip had sent to the cleaners was in the back of my closet It was back but he didn't know it. I smuggled it down into the gray coupe It's the kind of a jacket you don't forget A hell of a jacket Chartreuse and bright yellow in a hound's tooth check

I went right down to the pawn shop where I'd located the week before the duplicate of the brown bag, the thing that had started my vague planning I parked around the corner While I was still in the car I put the wads of cotton in my cheeks, gummed on the small black moustache

With a pale gray felt hat on, tilted at the angle Skip usually wore his, I hoped to leave the impression in the mind of the pawn shop owner that a fat cheeked, mustached man in a loud coat bought the brown bag I had to make it stick in his mind

The way to make it stick was easy He wanted three dollars for the bag I gave him ten and said, "The extra seven is for forgetting I ever came in here"

I glanced back through the dusty window as I reached the sidewalk He stood there with the bill in his hand, his eyes wide I went back to the car, got rid of the cotton, put the mustache away, put a few magazines in the bag and drove to the Twenty third Avenue Central Station

and checked the bag at the parcel counter. I put the check inside the sweat band of my hat and then accomplished the routine errands

On the way back out, I began to realize that Mandy's help would solve a few problems of timing It would make the whole operation far simpler

I was depending on the magician's trick of misdirection The audience watches the wrong hand I had to have Skip and our two specialists watching the wrong hand Each week they were keyed to a high point of wariness by the amount of money in the brown bag

Two days later I took Mandy to town with me. I took her to the place I had picked. I rehearsed her carefully in the timing. She went through it without any show of emotion. She giggled flatly a few times, as though it were all a game for children I gave her the parcel room check and the small scrap of paper on which I had scrawled the name of the pawn shop She was quick to understand.

The evening, before it was time to go to work, I locked my door and prepared the sign. I had the measurement of her largest purse. I made the cardboard sign just a bit smaller "*Out of Order.*" I had a roll of masking tape A small strip would serve to fasten it to the glass

I had selected our next to the last pickup When Skipworth brought the bag down from the business office upstairs, it would be almost as full as it would get. At this eighth stop on our route, I generally stayed in the car while Skip went in with the two specialists, past the long row of phone booths, eight of them, to the elevators. I had noticed that the booths were seldom in use at the time of day we usually arrived there—around eleven fifteen in the morning.

I hid the "*Out of Order*" sign by putting it in behind the cardboard inserted in one of my shirts that had just come back from the laundry.

The rest of it was a problem of waiting Sometimes it is hard to wait. Mostly, it is hard to remember not to vary your routine in the slightest way that might arouse suspicion

We met, Mandy and I, down by the river on the morning before the day it was to happen, and we went over it again, every part of it, the signals and all I had brought the sign down with me, under my shirt She transferred it to the big purse Her hand shook a little. I kissed her and her mouth was soft and cool

"He knows you're going into town in the morning?"

"Yes."

"It will look like you've done a lot of shopping?"

"I'll have the back seat of the taxi half full of bundles. I've picked everything out. The stores are close together. I can pick up everything in twenty minutes."

"You arranged that the day you bought the other suitcase?"

"Yes I checked it at the bus station. I thought it might look odd—two suitcases checked at different days. The man might remember"

"Smart girl!"

"Kiss me again, Johnny. For luck."

"For luck, honey."

CHAPTER FOUR

Pick Up a Corpse

I COULD sit in the car and go through the routine, but I couldn't keep from sweating. I could keep my face from betraying me, but I couldn't keep my palms from being greasy and cold

Skip was in good spirits At each stop the brown bag got heavier The two specialists kept their mouths shut, as usual. We always approached the eighth stop from the south. I'd told her where to

stand, her back to the street as though looking in a window It was a leather store with two show windows, one on either side of the door It was set If she stood by the window nearest our stop, she had been able to do her part without being observed If she was at the other window, we were going to have to let it go until later If Skip were to spot her, or either of the other two were to recognize her, we would have to give up and try again But it was a busy corner and the odds were against it

I saw her just as Skip began to slow down for our stop She was at the window I wanted her to be at Skip put the car in the loading zone across from the office building The offices of the Coin Machine Amusement Corporation were on the eighth floor I knew they would be up there for ten minutes I stayed in the car

As soon as two minutes had gone by, I went into the lobby, walking neither too fast nor too slow My *"Out of Order"* sign was pasted to the glass of the fourth phone booth from the end of the row nearest the door The door of the fifth booth was closed That was to keep anybody from seeing the bag Mandy had planted there, the duplicate bag

I was unobserved The elevators were around the corner ahead of me I opened the door of the booth without the *"Out of Order"* sign on it, not far enough to make the bag visible, but far enough to show that the booth was unoccupied Mandy was my girl My honey

It could still go sour The long minutes passed I could feel a dull throbbing behind my eyes This would be a hell of a time for the pain to hit me and knock me flat on the floor I fought it back

Then they swung around the corner of the corridor, coming toward me As they saw me there, the three of them tensed up You could see it I would come in only if, as lookout, I had spotted trouble. I indicated danger for them

They stopped by me I was standing opposite the booth with the *"Out of Order"* sign on it

"What is it, Johnny?" Skipworth demanded

"Maybe nothing, maybe something A few too many guys loitering A car just up the street with a guy in it and the motor running I smell trouble But I may be wrong"

Skip said to the specialists, "Go take a look, boys." He turned to me "Stay here, Johnny"

They walked up to the doorway, two small boned impassive little men with a suggestion of a strut in their walk

My turn I said, 'If it happened to be trouble, it would be nice to have that bag out of sight for a few minutes" I looked around as though I were looking for a place to set it down

I knew what Skip was thinking He was a guy to always take good care of his own skin If there was trouble, the man with the bag would be target number one He didn't say a word He took two quick steps, looked up and down the corridor, and then shoved open the door of the *"Out of Order"* booth and dropped the bag in He straightened up, shut the door, turned to me and winked

"Smart boy," I said

I moved over by the booths. With my foot I managed to close the one with the decoy bag in it Skip was busy watching the doors thirty feet away When he took a slow step forward, I reached up and pulled my sign off and put it on the other booth and gave the door enough of a shove to fold the sliding door so that it was half open He still didn't turn I pushed it not quite all the rest of the way.

It made a small noise He turned quickly. I was leaning against it. I saw his eye flick to the closed booth I moved away and gave a slow glance back The

money bag was almost completely hidden

One of the specialists appeared in the doorway, nodded and beckoned to us. Skip sighed with relief. He opened the booth with the sign on it, picked up the bag Mandy had planted there. We walked out and got in the car

As we turned the corner, I turned in the seat and offered the men in back a cigarette It gave me a chance to look back I saw Mandy heading in through the doorway we had just come out of The wrong brown bag was between my feet A bunch of old magazines

Again I waited in the car as the three of them went into the last place, Skip carrying the bag. Holding the bag. They came out fast and I could see that Skip was chalk-white around the mouth. The specialists were carrying themselves with stiff shouldered dignity, as though trying to disassociate themselves from this fiasco

He got behind the wheel and tossed the bag at my feet It hurt my toes

"Watch it!" I snapped angrily.

"Shut up," he growled

"What's eating you, Skip?"

He stalled the motor getting the car started He cursed One of the little men in the back seat said, "Look, chum. You and your friend were alone with that bag. You sent us out to look at some little men who weren't there"

"You shut up too," Skip growled

"Would it be too much trouble to tell me what happened?" I demanded.

Skip groaned "I don't get it! I just don't get it! Somebody took all the money out of the bag and put in a bunch of old magazines! It's impossible, that's what it is!"

"You had the bag every minute," I said.

"I know it!" he said in a thin taut voice "And when I opened it back there to put in the last wad, there was nothing but magazines We got to tell Sonny."

"He'll be very happy, I'm sure," I said.

SONNY was jut getting up He was in his shower He came out with his hair wet, belting his maroon robe around him The four of us stood there Sonny sat on the edge of his bed, took a cigarette from his night table and lighted it.

"Let's have it!" he said.

Skip did a fumbling job of telling him He was plainly jittery.

"Let's see that bag, Skip." Skip handed it to him Sonny ran his fingertips over the outside of it. "Same make and same color, but not the same bag This one is more scuffed up You damn fools had a switch pulled on you"

"I don't see how that could happen," Skip complained "I didn't "

"Shut up. Start talking Take me right along with you Every move you made." He listened as Skip brought it right up to the moment when I had spoken to them in the corridor "Hold it!"

He looked at me "Well, Johnny?"

"There were too many loiterers. A man in a car with the motor running. It just didn't look right The boys went and checked on it"

Sonny gave them his cold expressionless stare "How about it?"

One of them shrugged "There was a guy in the car with the motor running. There were guys hanging around the corner We gave them a long eye. We figured Doyle was a little jumpy."

"I was," I said

"Now let's get to work on that phone-booth deal," Sonny said softly. "That sort of intrigues me, as the fella says. Whose idea was it to shove the bag in there?"

"Skip's," I said.

"Sure," Skip said quickly. "I didn't want no bag in my hand if there was a bunch of boys trying to hijack us. That booth looked good to me"

"There wasn't another bag in there?"

"Hell, I would have seen it, Sonny."

"You put the bag in that phone booth and then you took it right back out of the same booth, eh?"

"That's just what I did, Sonny. There weren't two bags. Just the one."

Sonny let the silence grow. He studied Skipworth for a long time. The bigger man shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Finally he blurted, "Hell, Sonny, you don't think I'd—"

"Shut up. Doyle, was it an official sign on that booth? Printed?"

I frowned. "I can't exactly remember, but I think it was just printed on cardboard with pencil. Yes, I'm sure it was." I nodded my head.

Sonny opened the bag and took out the magazines, one by one. He laid them beside him on the bed. Then he picked up each magazine at a time by the backbone and shook it. Nothing came out. Next he turned his attention to the bag. He examined the outside of it, inch by inch. He turned it upside down and rapped on the bottom. He opened it wide and fingered the inside of it.

I saw him reach into the side flap pocket. His hand came out slowly and he unwadded the little piece of paper. It was the paper on which I had penciled, "Poulser's Pawn Shoppe." He looked at it for a long time. I found that I was holding my breath. I wanted a cigarette.

Sonny took the phone book out of the night table drawer. He opened it and found the P's and ran his thumbnail down the column to the right name. He grinned at us.

"Just make yourselves comfortable, men. I gotta get some clothes on. We're going for a little trip."

Sweat kept popping out on Skip's forehead and he kept blotting it up with a limp handkerchief as we waited. If ever a guy looked guilty, Skip did. It helped a lot. Sonny kept grinning at him as he dressed. We all went down to the car.

"You drive, Skipper," Sonny said, his tone languid and dangerous.

"Look, Sonny. Don't act like I—"

"Shut up and drive!"

We just turned down the drive when the taxi came in. "Hold it," Sonny said. He got out and walked over to the cab. Mandy gave him a bright smile.

"Don't be sore, darling," I heard her say, "I spent the whole works. Wait until you see me in some of these things. I'm going to knock your eyes out."

She took an armload of packages and the cab driver took an armload. The packages bore the labels of smart shops.

"Is anything wrong, darling?" she asked him, quick concern in her voice. She was good. She was better than I had any right to expect.

"Not a thing, honey. Not a thing."

He walked back and got in beside Skip. I was in the back with the two specialists. "Go to the fourteen hundred block on Division Street, Skip," Sonny ordered.

Nobody talked on the trip into town. As we reached the fourteen hundred block, Sonny slid forward on the seat. "Put it over there by that hydrant," he said.

We all followed him. He carried the empty brown bag. He went into the pawn shop. Skip said to me in a low tone, "What the hell is this?"

I shrugged. As I went up the two steps, I saw the familiar proprietor walking down through the narrow store toward us. If my luck was good, he wouldn't remember me going in and looking at the bags on my first visit.

Sonny threw the bag at the man's chest. His storekeeper's smile slid off his face as he caught it. His shrewd eyes were narrowed and wary. "What is this, gentlemen?"

"Did you sell that?"

The man handled the bag. He shrugged his fat shoulders. "Who knows? Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. Can I remember everything I sell?" I saw his eyes

slide over the group, return hesitantly to Skipworth and slide away again

"Maybe you need some help with your memory," Sonny said softly He turned and nodded at the two specialists They moved in quickly The bag dropped as they grabbed his puffy arms

"Wait!" the man said shrilly He gave Skip an apologetic smile "Seven dollars is nice, but not enough to take no beating for, mister"

Skip's mouth sagged open "What the hell is this?" he gasped.

"Let go of him" Sonny ordered

The boys let go of the arms The man beamed and nodded at Sonny. "Thank you"

"You've seen him before?" Sonny asked, jerking his thumb toward Skip worth

"I don't want to make trouble for him, mister He came in maybe a week ago maybe less, I think he did Maybe I am just thinking so because the man who came in and bought this bag had a black mustache and fat cheeks too A gray hat And my, what a coat he is wear ing! Yellow and green. The bag is three dollars. He gave me ten and said I shouldn't mention it I wouldn't ex cept I am too old to take beatings I don't make enough at this living I should take beatings"

WITH a growling sound in his throat, Skip charged the man Sonny nodded at one of the boys With a cat quick motion, he slapped Skip across the back of the neck with the barrel of an automatic that had appeared like magic Skip staggered and his knees buckled The two specialists took him and walked him out of the shop to the car.

Sonny took out his bill clip and slid a fifty apart from the rest He handed it to the man He said, "You don't like beatings, old man. Maybe the police might stop and see you some time. You don't know anything If you should let the cops scare you, if maybe you should open that mouth of yours, I'll send somebody to see you I'm Sonny Bolender I like people to know who is talking to them"

The man's smile had the painted look of a smile on a clown's face He nodded his head rapidly. "A bad memory I've got."

As we walked to the door Sonny said, with deep disgust, "Seven bucks to keep quiet!"

Sonny drove I stay away from a steering wheel, at least when I can avoid it. Too much chance of an attack while driving Skip was in the back seat I looked back at him. His eyes had a wide staring look. He wet his lips every few seconds

When he tried to laugh, it was a ghastly sound "Sonny, that old guy was crazy. Somebody's framing me, Sonny."

There was no answer

"You got to listen to me, Sonny! We've been together too long for you to believe that I'd do a thing like that!"

No answer

"I don't know what happened to the money, Sonny. Honest I don't!"

Silence Just the purr of the tires.

The next was almost a scream "Sonny, you gotta listen to me!"

"Turn on the radio, Doyle," Sonny said. "I always like a little music while I'm thinking"

The next time I looked around, Skip had his face in his hands. His shoulders were shaking One of the specialists was cleaning his fingernails with a match The other looked out the car window. I was laughing inside I was remembering the way Skipworth held me around the middle while they started to work on my hand.

We got back at twenty minutes of one. The fight was gone out of Skipworth. "Put him in the wine cellar," Sonny told the boys. Once upon a time it had been

the old wine cellar. Stone walls. Nearly soundproof No windows.

They took him away. "What are you going to do?" I asked Sonny.

He spat "Get the dough back. That's number one. He had to have somebody work with him. That somebody'll have the money. Skipper'll be so anxious to talk that he won't be able to get the words out fast enough."

"Look," I said seriously. "Maybe he *was* framed!"

Sonny stared at me "Don't be a damn fool. He was smart enough That little piece of paper in the bag crossed him up. If it hadn't been for that, I bet he would have gotten away with it. He can be a very convincing guy. Maybe he would have managed to pin it on you, Johnny. I bet he would have tried "

I shrugged "That's logical. I'm the newest guy. He could say that I'm still holding a grudge on account of what you all did to me in Paris that time "

"You asked for that, Johnny. You wouldn't listen to sensible talk "

"I know that now, Sonny."

"We're going to be shorthanded. Have to find some new bright boys But not too bright."

"What'll happen to Skip?"

"He's going on a trip He's going to steal dough out of the casino and leave town in the gray coupe And I bet nobody's ever going to find him."

He went in I stood out in the parking area for a time. The sun was warm on my shoulders but the back of my neck felt cold.

Sonny, Mandy and I ate together Sonny was very quiet Over coffee he briefed her. Her eyes grew wider and wider. "But Sonny! Skip is your friend! I mean you've been together so long!"

"A money friend, honey. Excuse me "

He left us We heard him go upstairs Later he came back through and went down into the cellars with the two boys.

"Was it all right?" I asked even though I could guess

"I think so. No one saw me get it I took it to the bus station and got the other bag out and took them both into the women's room Oh yes, I remembered to take the sign too I folded it up and stuffed it in one of those city waste paper things on the corner The brown bag fitted inside the other just like you said it would

"And I checked it again, put the check in the envelope you gave me and mailed it from the bus station When do we get it, Johnny?"

"Not for a while. Not until we're ready to leave."

We sat in silence. Then thin on the air, as frail as something imagined rather than heard, came a high thin wavering scream She looked at me and her mouth suddenly had a sick twist.

"We did that to him, Johnny," Mandy mumbled.

"Isn't that a bleeding shyme?" I told her.

"Johnny, that's a terrible sickness in you. Like death itself."

"Just like death Death for Al and now for Skipper and then for Sonny. Don't you like it?"

"I don't have to like it, Johnny. I've helped you I'll keep on helping you But I don't have to like it. I keep wondering if, with this hardness in you, there'll be room for any kind of affection . for me. Any . . laughter for us, Johnny Any jokes between us." Her voice broke and her eyes filled suddenly. "Doesn't that sound corny, Johnny? Doesn't it," she insisted.

I couldn't answer The distant scream came again and I guess we both knew that the scream was like acid lines being etched across our souls, lines that couldn't ever be erased.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "Let's walk."

CHAPTER FIVE

Fishing for a Frame

WE WENT down by the river but it wasn't any good We couldn't hear him, of course But it seemed as though we could The kisses were no good We told each other they'd be better after it was all over

It was four o'clock before we went back up to the place Sonny was waiting for us He stared at us with quick hard suspicion "You two have been seeing a lot of each other lately."

She linked her arm in his "Don't be an old bear Sonny!"

He pushed her away. "Go on upstairs. Wait for me in my place I want to talk to Johnny."

I heard her lagging step on the stairs He lit a cigarette with tight jerky motions. "Are you making a play?" he asked softly

I grinned at him "I'd like to, but I've got better judgement than that"

The suspicion slowly went out of his eyes "Okay, okay."

"How did you make out?" I asked

He cursed softly and at length "He was too tough Tougher than I thought he'd be I think he was cracking, right at the end But then he went out on me. Heart, I guess Those guys that pick up too much weight too fast, it's usually heart Maybe I got a little excited Anyway, it's done now.

"The boys have gone down to ask questions around that office building Tonight Skipper's stealing the gray coupe and taking off with five thousand out of the casino I'll report it after we get rid of him. You go pack a bag for him Keep any of his stuff that looks good to you. Put it in the coupe"

"Right now?"

"Before there're too many people around. Run the coupe around behind the garage. You see some blankets there, don't kick them You might wake Skipper up" He showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"Who's going to . . ."

"The boys are briefed on that detail. It's a beauty. That's a hell of a deep hole there But tire marks would show on the bank So they use two planks, run the coupe in and then float the plank down the river and come back across lots. Nice?"

"Very pretty."

He went upstairs I stood there for a long time. He was going up to Mandy I wanted it to be Sonny down there in that deep hole in the bottom of the river. I slowly grew conscious of pain and I found that the fingernails of my right hand were bruising the palm The left hand was too weak

It was time to stop thinking I had routine work to do A lot of it. I raised hell with the help and set the kids to work cleaning the big dishwasher and gave Mike hell because his liquor inventory was twenty four hours late I was pretty good at shutting off the thinking process So good in fact that when Old Tim asked me where Mr Skipworth was, I had to stop and think, but not for long

At five minutes of eight I was standing by the cashier's cage. Sonny came storming into the casino He put on a good act. Every employee stopped and stared at him as he shouted at me: "Skipworth has run out! He took the coupe and a wad of dough" He stood so that I was the only one who could see the wink.

"You'd better report it, Sonny. Maybe he won't get far."

He wheeled around and headed for a phone. All the employees started buzzing. The casino doors were open. I raised my voice. "All right, all right None of you heard a thing Just don't let it give any of you any ideas." Several of them gave me nervous smiles.

Headquarters sent out a squad car. It

was funny watching them pretending not to see the doorway to the casino They asked everybody questions and carefully wrote down the answers Two reporters showed We answered their questions too.

The newspaper reports couldn't hurt us. Anything that remotely affected Mr Bolender was handled with extreme care by smart city editors on both big papers Sonny Bolender was a bad man to annoy —even worse than the man he had displaced when he had come home from the wars.

By ten o'clock, the sergeant had bowed his way out. "Yes, Mr Bolender . . . you can be assured, Mr. Bolender . . . of course, Mr Bolender."

I went in and stood at the end of the bar where I could look through the wide arched doorway into the big dining room. There was that hush which always came when Mandy Powers sang. She was in silver, standing tall with strong shoulders and the smooth throbbing column of her throat. I stood there and her voice came husky soft over the amplifier set over the bar. She seemed to be looking across all the tables, right at me, right into my heart, saying the dog eared words of an old tired song.

It was lament She held that last long note, her eyes half closed, her chin high, her hands at her sides, held out a little way, the palms turned toward the front There was a moment of silence, and then she was bowing to the hard roar of applause She tried to leave and they clapped her back to the mike

The rest of the evening was bad The customers had empty eyes and empty faces and meaningless laughs I went into the casino and watched the play for a time I saw a hard eyed woman in a green evening dress with a slim stack of reds in front of her Most of the play is in the whites—at five bucks a copy. The reds are fifty and the blues are a hundred The woman moved like a robot.

With each turn of the wheel, she put a red on double zero I thought she might be trouble. I moved to the other side of the table Her small white teeth were set against her lower lip She put the last one out. It was raked in She sat there for a moment making no bet The ball dropped into double zero A small bright line of blood ran from her lower lip. She stood up woodenly, took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped away the blood

I caught her at the door and said, "Do you have transportation, madam?"

She gave me an empty look I handed her a five dollar bill. "This will cover your taxi fare to town," I said

She took it, brushed by me and shoved it under the window of the cashier's cage, then walked back to the table with the white chip in her hand I followed her. She put it on double zero She lost. I let her leave When they're like that, there's nothing that can be done.

THERE was a smell in the room that the best ventilating system wouldn't remove The smell of fear. The musky, animal smell that fills a game room when the play is high, hot and heavy There was the usual trouble A fat man was signaled out to me by the pit nearest pit boss as being potential. I moved over One of our girls was dealing the black jack to him alone. I could see at once that she was nervous.

He hunched over his cards He had a five showing When he peeked at the hole card, I saw the flash of a face card. Fifteen. Too low to stay on, unless he wanted to take the chance of the dealer going over He studied a long time Then he made a little motion with his hand

She fed him an eight Twenty-three. He flipped the hole card over and she reached for his chip. When she was close enough, without warning, he belted her across the mouth She staggered back I lifted him out of the chair by the back of

I woke up—to find Lieutenant Goldwine sitting on the foot of my bed.

his coat collar. Two of our muscle boys came over.

I said, "This gentleman won't play any more tonight, or any other night. Cash him in and throw him out."

They were good at it. Nobody would have guessed that they weren't three friends heading for the door. The pain in the way they held his hand drew him along absolutely speechless.

"How's the nerve, honey?" I asked the dealer.

Her mouth was cut inside, her upper lip swelling. "I can make out," she said.

"Take a half-hour break and get off your feet," I told her. The pit boss had come up beside me. "I shoulda got him sooner, Marie," he apologized. We watched her walk back to the doorway that leads to the employee's lounge.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

He nodded glumly. "Sure, but she won't last here. She's been here too long. She's caught the fever. I got it she's playing the horses. So I'm watching close. She gets too far in, she'll be tapping us to make up the losses and then boom."

It was that kind of a night. Skip was dead. Something inside me was dead. The Mad Hatter was a peopled nightmare. The music was a quarter-tone sour and the drinks were bitter and the women were evil and the men were empty-faced.

I was glad when it was over.

There were no dreams that night. I lay like a man dead. I woke up in a perfectly smooth and unrumpled bed—the sort of a bed you would find if a corpse lay in it all night.

Lieutenant Goldwine was sitting on the foot of my bed smoking a cigar and looking at me with mild good humor. He looked like a blackbird sitting on a whitewashed rock. I had no way of knowing how long he'd been watching.

When I opened my eyes the second

time, Lieutenant Goldwine was still there.

"Did you knock?" I asked him.

"I had to see if you were sleeping good. There's a lot in how people sleep."

"How was I doing, Lieutenant?"

"Like a baby. Like a pore innocent lil chile."

I sat up in bed and reached for a cigarette. He leaned over and held a battered old lighter for me. "How's the head, Johnny?" he asked casually.

"I see you've been taking some time and trouble checking on me. Should I be flattered?"

"If you want to be. I've been watching you sleep wondering how it feels to know you might be stone dead."

"It feels, Lieutenant, as though your mama told you you couldn't go to the big party all the kids are having and then you find out the party is at your house."

He studied the half inch of silvery ash on the end of his cigar, flipped it neatly into his pants cuff. "Speaking of parties, Johnny, that must have been a nice one yesterday just before noon."

"Did I miss something?"

"Don't do that to me, Johnny. Word gets around. Fellow says the expression on Skip's face when he opened that bag to put the last payment in was really something for the books. Turned three colors at once."

"I wouldn't know about that. I just go along for the ride."

The out of focus eyes looked through me. "You can't keep a thing like that bottled up, Johnny. The Commissioner waited around a hell of a while before he gave up and went to lunch."

"Maybe you came out to pick yours up in person," I said quietly.

The hard cords stood out in his wrinkled throat and muscles bulged at the corners of his thin jaw. The anger went as soon as it came. He studied his cigar. "I suppose, Johnny, it's a sort of philosophical rather than an ethical problem. It depends on what you think a man really is. I have myself figured out. I'm a cop. Wanted to be one when I was a little kid. Am one. Plan to be one until I'm tripping on my beard.

"If I took my share of grease, I wouldn't be a cop any longer. I'd be a hired boy for Bolender. I can stay a cop because I got my hands on a few letters and records and put them where they're safe some years back. They don't have to promote me. I'm happy. But they can't bust me and they can't fire me."

"I'm sorry I said that, Lieutenant."

"It doesn't matter. I don't care what you say, Johnny." He grinned without humor. "I don't much care what happens to me. You smart boys all look alike to me. It's nice the local population is going down. First Hoaglund and now Skipworth."

"Haven't they picked Skipper up yet?"

He chuckled. "I got a crystal ball in my desk. I heard about yesterday and how things sort of blew up in Skip's face. Then I read the report on the investigation last night. I looked in my crystal ball and there was Skip. Cold stone dead. But, hell! I'm not working on that case. I'm working on Hoaglund. Time enough to work on Skip when we find the body. That is, if we ever do."

The little man bothered me. He stood up, wiped out the butt in the ash tray on my dresser. I could see his face reflected in the mirror. He said, very softly, "Hell, Johnny. I'm not even working on Bolender until he's dead."

"I think Sonny's a pretty good insurance risk."

He laughed. "I wouldn't sell him a dime's worth, Johnny."

He walked out without another word. The second cigarette tasted dry and bitter in my mouth. I showered, shaved and dressed slowly. By the time I got to the table for breakfast, it was a little after eleven. I thought Sonny was still in bed.

So I was surprised when he came in as I was finishing my coffee. He had a man with him, a young man with a sharply receding hairline, sideburns halfway down his cheeks, and a cocky walk.

They came over to the table. "New boy," Sonny said, "Pete Karrol. Pete, this is Johnny Doyle."

I shook hands with him. Sonny said, "Sit down and get acquainted with Johnny, Pete." He walked out.

Pete sat down. He had big hard knuckles and dirty fingernails. He gave me a flat stare. "Sonny's getting smart. You got to come up out of his other joints to know how to handle an operation like this. What do you do around here, Doyle?"

I SIPPED my coffee. I set the cup down carefully. "One of the first things I do with all new employees is straighten them out. Go wash your hands. They're dirty. Use the men's room in the employee's lounge. Get those fingernails clean. Then I want those sideburns shaved off. They make you look like a cheap hood, which you probably are, but let's fool the people, shall we?"

He stiffened. He leaned toward me. "Maybe you got something to learn about the way things are going to be around here, Doyle."

I smiled at him. "Let's fly right, Karrol. If I say you go, you go. Check with Sonny if you want to waste his time. Now what'll it be, go or stay?"

He met my glance for about ten seconds. Then his eyes wavered. He looked down at his hands and put them out of sight. "Well, I ——"

"You're wasting time. Go do as I told you and then come and find me. I'll be somewhere in the building. I'll give you your orders for the day."

As soon as he left, I went up to Sonny's apartment. He was on his back on his bed reading a magazine. "Yeah, Johnny?"

"Just checking," I said. "I think maybe you gave Karrol some wrong ideas."

"Like what, Johnny?"

"Like he might be in the inside and I might be on the outside looking in. So let's get it straight, Sonny."

"Let's just say you both got the same rank, boy."

"No, thanks. He works for me. He does what I say."

"Suppose I just let you two fight that out, Johnny."

"And you'll stick by the decision?"

"Sure."

"Then it's all settled. I sent him off to wash his hands and cut off those sideburns. He took it like a little lamb."

He grinned. "You kill me, Johnny."

"Now that you know how good I am, you might as well sweeten the kitty a little. With Big Al and the Skipper gone, it won't come out of you."

"Greedy, Johnny?"

"Probably."

He looked at me for a long time. Some problem seemed to be resolving itself in his mind. He seemed to relax. "That Goldy is a funny guy, Johnny. He's smart."

"How do you mean?"

"This morning he hints to me that I better watch you close. He hints that you may be nuts and that you came here to kill the three of us, Al, Skip and me, on account of that left hand is no combat injury. How the hell he figures that hand is a problem."

I stood there and the room seemed to be slowly revolving around his eyes, the way a phonograph record revolves around the spindle. "Is he crazy?" I asked.

"I've been thinking, Johnny. I've figured out how you could have framed Al. Just let me say it's possible, but not probable. But I don't see how the hell you could have done it to Skip unless you hired some guy who looked like him and then had somebody behind the wall with a

panel or something cut into the phone booth. Now I'm going to stop trying to figure it out You know why? If you were fixing to knock me off, Johnny, you wouldn't be asking for more money or getting huffy because I brought another guy in without telling him to take orders from you."

"So Goldy was just trying to split us, eh?"

"That's the way it shapes up. He's a slick little item, that guy."

"Glad to know I'm not trying to knock you off, Sonny."

"The whole thing has just made me sort of jumpy."

"Can't blame you for that."

"Just don't walk behind me for a while, Johnny." He gave out a hawl of laughter. Then he sobered "Go rent a safety deposit box. A big one. You'll be taking Skip's place next week I'll give you more dope later. There's the Commissioner's envelope on the desk over there. You can take it down to him now and rent the box on the same trip."

"How are you going to get the dough out of Skip's box?"

"Hell, I was on the signature card with him. I already got it this morning. Tell them I'm going onto your card with you, too."

"If I get the box, I could put the money in at the same time," I said.

"Never mind that, Johnny."

Mandy came in, her face angry. "Who's the new beast downstairs, Sonny?"

Sonny picked up his magazine. "Go teach him manners, Johnny, before you head for town."

"For town?" Mandy asked. "Can I go with you, Johnny?"

I glanced at Sonny for permission He nodded absently, already back into the story he had laid aside when I interrupted him

We had just turned out into the speedway, when I found out why she wanted to go along. She moved close to me. "Johnny, that little detective knows about us We haven't fooled him."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody saw us down by the river, I guess Maybe it was him. Maybe he had binoculars or something."

I thought it over while a full mile went by "I don't see how it can help him. If he hinted to Sonny, we'd just be watched. All we have to do is be careful a little while longer."

Her fingers jabbed hard into me. "How long, Johnny? How long?"

"Not long Nervous?"

"Not when I'm with you. Just when I'm alone. How are we . . . going to do it?" she asked.

"We?"

"I'm in this with you. Remember? Remember me?"

"The face is vaguely familiar." I had to grin at her.

"Johnny, did you see Skip?"

"I took a quick look. He wasn't very pretty, if that's what you mean."

"Where will we run to, Johnny? Where will we go?"

"We'll find a place Money always finds a place. We'll have new names."

"Is it too corny to want a little house?" she pleaded

"Not if it's you that wants it, Mandy." I wondered if my words were convincing.

"Too much has happened to me. I've lived too fast, Johnny. I've got to slow up Take time out. Sit and listen to the hours slow up as they go by. Can we do that? Can we? Or will it be . . ."

"Be what, darling?"

"A little house with too many ghosts in it."

"We'll buy them a drink."

"Oh, Johnny I'll make you well again. I will."

Somewhere behind my eyes a sliver of steel was chuckling "Sure you will," I said.

CHAPTER SIX

The Lieutenant Butts in

SHE waited in the car while I took the envelope up to the Commissioner. He remarked that it was difficult for him when we were late. I said that it was due to circumstances outside of my control. He nodded, but he didn't offer the cigars. Not for late money.

From there I went to the bank. Again she waited. They didn't want to rent me a box. They knew me. But they had to do it. They weren't quite sure enough of themselves to be willing to say no to Bolender.

There was a print on the wall near the desk where I signed the signature card. A familiar print. It showed a bear standing by a deep green pool. He was in the process of hooking a big fish out onto the bank. He looked pleased about it.

Little wheels started to whirr in my head. They raced and then meshed nicely. I came out of it when the man coughed to get my attention and held his hand out for the card. I paid him a year's rental and he gave me the two keys in a little red envelope.

Mandy felt that something was wrong with me. "What happened?"

"Did I ever tell you about me and my trap line?"

"Of course not."

"It was fine. My dad bought me the traps. I was going to get enough skins to buy a college education. I read the books on how to do it. I put the traps out. That was in Minnesota. The first time I went along my trap line, I found a big muskrat in the fourth trap. Muskrats they call them up there. He looked at me and I looked at him. I shot him and went home. It was a week before I could make myself go out and gather up the traps. The store wouldn't take them back. They got rusty in the back of the garage. I guess the junk man took them eventually." I started the motor of the big sedan. I missed the coupe. That was easy to drive and park.

"Why are you telling me this, Johnny?"

"We need a bear trap and a length of chain."

She started to laugh like someone trying hard to see the joke. But I looked at her and the laughter stopped as though I had taken her by the throat.

"Johnny, you don't mean that—"

"A length of nice strong chain, Mandy."

"It sounds like—like a way that wouldn't be safe, Johnny."

"I'll tell you about it. You'll see how safe it is."

The third place I went into had a bear trap in stock. They'd had it a long time and they had to look a long time before they found it. The outside of the carton was discolored with age. It hadn't rusted.

I reached under the toothed circle and touched the pan. The steel teeth clammed together with a vicious shattering *chomp* and the trap jumped six inches off the floor as though trying to snap up at something.

"A very good model," the clerk said, "Very effective. Once he puts a foot in that, he won't get it out in a hurry. Haha."

"How much?"

"Seven ninety-eight. Where is the bear?"

"Near my summer place."

I paid him and went out with it wrapped under my arm. I put it between us on the front seat. Mandy moved as far from it as she could get. It was easier buying twenty feet of thin strong chain.

On the way back I told her how we'd do it. Her face told me nothing. After a long time she said, "Yes, Johnny. It will work."

"We'll watch it work."

"I . . . I'll dream about it, afterward."

"You'll get over that."

Dawn was chill and misty as I let my-

self out the back It was gray I had the chain in my pocket, the trap under my arm Near the river the mist was heavier It changed the landscape so that it was hard for me to get my bearings The world was still and silent It seemed to take a long time to follow the bank until I came to where the coupe had been run off

It took me a long time to find the exact place The boys had scuffed the dirt up to disguise the smooth places where the boards had pressed against the ground I couldn't see the other bank, though I knew it was not over sixty feet away. A distant rooster crowed and a dog barked I had to make certain of the dropoff I found the place where it was steepest The bank dropped three sheer feet to the water's edge. I lay on the ground and prodded down into the water with a branch from a tree The sheer drop continued below the surface

With my hands, I dug into the soft dirt It packed under my fingernails. It was a type of clay, very greasy to the touch I made it six inches deep, maybe a little more, an about eighteen inches across at the widest point. Roughly oval.

When I tried to set the trap, my dirty hands slipped and it nearly caught me. The closeness of it started me sweating again. When it was at last open and cocked, I wedged it carefully down into the hole I had made It fit nicely. I took it out and fastened the chain to the heavy ring and replaced the trap I dug a groove for the chain

The chain was bright enough to attract attention, so I smeared it with the wet dirt I found a dead tree and broke off about twenty twigs long enough to reach across the hole above the trap I jammed them in the sides of the hole, a fraction of an inch below the ground level. When they were neatly aligned, I took the sheets of paper out of my pocket and laid them across the twigs Last, I sprinkled dirt until it covered the paper I worked at it a long time until no paper showed and the area looked exactly the same as the rest of the bank near the dropoff.

The groove for the chain led right off the edge I covered the chain with dirt and smoothed it out, then made a second groove four feet to the left The slack of the chain hung below the edge of the bank No one could see it unless they stood on the very edge and looked down. I leaned over the edge and pressed the slack into the soft bank When I turned around, I was afraid to step I could not see where I had hidden the trap

It took me a long time to make out the exact place It had to be marked in some obvious and yet innocent way. I tore a tiny strip of celophane from my pack of cigarettes and pressed it gently down into the dirt in the center of the covered hole. The wind wouldn't blow it away and it was enough of a mark so that I could immediately make out the rest of the hole, edges and all, faint as it was.

After bringing the loose end of the chain up the second groove, I buried it and smoothed the earth flat I could have left it out It was just another precaution.

THF trip back seemed to go faster. Behind the garage was the pile of cinder block left over and not hauled away by the contractor Two would be all right. Three would be better I piled three up, got my fingers under the bottom one and stood up with them They were a hell of a load After a hundred yards my arms felt as though they were pulling out of the sockets My back was strained and my heels hit hard with every step

The first time I stopped and rested, it refreshed me The second rest period did a little bit of good After the third, I knew that if I set them down again I d have to carry them one at a time, and I didn't want to waste the time doing that The mist was lifting off the river. I could see

the outline of the far bank just above the water level.

My heels sank deeply into the soft dirt as I reached my spot I let them drop with a thud I sat on them and panted for a while My hands trembled badly from the exert on

I uncovered the loose end of the chain, threaded it up through the three cinder blocks, brought it back down and tied it to itself securely Inch by inch I moved the three blocks, until they were on the very edge of the bank, four feet from the buried trap I was sweat-sodden, mud stained and filthy As I reached the back door, the sun was beginn ng to bite down through the mist

I took my time getting to my room As soon as I locked the door behind me, I went into the bathroom and stripped. After I showered, I scraped the mud from the edges of my shoes and off the knees of my pants I flushed the drying clods of mud down the toilet, went over the pants and then the shoes with a damp washcloth, and washed the cloth in the sink.

I put on fresh clothes and went out through the club to the kitchens Mandy was seated at the table near the windows and coffee was on the smaller range, just beginning to perc I smiled at her

"Well, aren't you up early!" she said. I got juice out of the big refrigerator and poured two glasses I took them to the table She didn't look good The whites of her eyes had a stained look and her skin looked heavy and grainy. "Did you do it?" she asked softly

I nodded and saw her hands tighten into two f sts. She shut her eyes for a moment then opened them and gave me a thin smile "Good!" she whispered

We d dn't talk very much. She was dressed as I had suggested, slacks and a wool shirt and walking shoes She had piled the copper hair high It made her face look more fragile

We went for our walk, out the drive to the shoulder of the speedway, up to the cutoff and over to the bank The last of the mist was gone The sky was blue The gravel road was qu et and b rds sang. We could hear the tearing sound of the cars on the speedway heading into town Men hurrying toward that time clock, that office desk, that assembly line Growl at the kids, kiss the wife and head toward town, worrying all the way about the mortgage payment, fighting the other traffic, cursing the lights

Funny thing I envied them

I caught her arm and said, "Careful, honey Stand still See that little p ece of celophane? That's it "

"You can't see it at all!"

"I told you I read those books," I said. "Now listen to how we do it. We'll be on each side of him I'll be on his left It'll have to be that way You be on his right. I'll go over to the cinderblocks You be careful to stay out of the trap without looking for it.

"You better practise a l ttle Get your lines right. Know where you're going Be a step ahead of him and get him just right. If he doesn't hit it the first time, I told you what to do As soon as you hear it go off, make a dive to your right. I don't want him grabbing you "

She nodded "I understand, Johnny."

We turned and headed back the way we had come, after she had gone through the motions a few times

Lieutenant Goldwine got up off his heels as we reached the corner where the cutoff joined the speedway Morning traffic had increased in volume. He touched his shabby hat and said, " 'Morning, Mandy, Johnny Nice morning for a walk."

"It certainly is," I said

"I thought you people in the entertainment business slept late."

"Not always," Mandy said in a ch lly little tone

I was wondering how far a little man

could see through the mist, and how much he could see. There might be less time than I thought. Standing there, smiling at him, I made a change in our plans. I asked him if he wanted to walk along with us.

He said he might as well, because the city bus stopped near the Mad Hatter. He walked between us, where Sonny would walk.

Even in her flat heels, Mandy was an inch or so taller than Goldy. He scuffed his heels as he walked.

"Caught yourself that murderer yet?" I asked him.

"No, I haven't. That one's a toughie, Johnny. A real bad one." He reached into his coat pocket and took out a little misshapen chunk of lead. He held it up between his thumb and finger. "Twenty-two long rifle. Funny to think a little thing like this could chop down a fellow the size of Al Hoagland, isn't it?"

He was really bland, this Lieutenant Goldwine was.

"Do they let you carry that around?" Mandy asked.

"Oh, the lab took so many pictures of it they don't need it any more. I'll put it in my collection. Funny the things a man collects. Got a few knives. Some sash cord.

"Things like that. Every one of them snapped somebody right off this earth. There's one thing I haven't got in the collection. A bear trap. That would make quite an addition, wouldn't it? What's the matter, Miss Powers? Feel sick?" Goldwine asked.

"No, I don't feel sick. Should I?"

"I thought you looked a little white there for a minute. Bear trap and chain. Johnny, you should have guessed I'd have a tail on you."

"I didn't think about it, Lieutenant." But now I was.

"I've got to have a little talk with Sonny, I guess."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sliver of Satan

I SWUNG the no-good left hand. I swung it up like a stone on the end of a string. I felt one of the old breaks give as it hit the point of his chin. He fell against Mandy and she went sprawling down into the shallow ditch, her eyes wide and wild.

He lay with his feet on the shoulder, sticking out of the grass. An oncoming car slowed. I gave them a wide grin and kicked his legs over so that he rolled over once and lay on his face in the bottom of the ditch. Mandy had scrambled up.

"Johnny," she said in a thin voice. "You' can't—"

"Shut up! Get out there and hitch a ride into town. You'll get picked up fast. Get that check out of the post office and pick up the dough and come back here in a cab. Here's the keys to the sedan. Lock the dough in the back end. I'll be waiting for you. With luck I can be back here in forty minutes. You've *got* to be back here that quick."

She started to tremble all over. I slapped her cheek, hard. She came out of it. Goldwine moaned and lifted his head. I kicked him behind the ear and he dropped. I lay down beside him. I could look up and see her on the shoulder twenty feet away. Traffic screamed on the pavement. She hurried after the cars.

When I was certain she was gone, I stood up. I watched the traffic. Finally there was a gap in the cars. I picked Goldy up in my arms and ran across the six lane highway with it and over into the field on the other side. The grass was thick.

I dropped him and lay down. The pain in my hand had gone from bitter sharpness to a dull throb. I used his belt on his ankles. He had a squatty .38 jammed in his hip pocket. I threw it over into the

The blocks dragged him under like a stone. . . .

grass. With my own belt, I lashed his elbows together, pulling them as close together behind him as I could.

I tore off a wide hunk of his shirt tail and stuffed it into his mouth and tied it in place with his necktie around the back of his neck. It was hard to tie the knots with only one good hand. When I had finished, his eyes opened and slowly focused on me.

My head was aching very dimly, very far away. "You'll be able to hitch yourself along somehow, Lieutenant. But it'll take a long time. I had to get you out of circulation for a while."

He nodded. His eyes were quiet, showing no anger and no fear.

"I could kill you and give us a better start." He nodded again. It would be smart to kill him. I knew it. But I couldn't do it. I wanted to, but I couldn't.

I crawled away in the opposite direction from the road in order to mislead him. Sometimes it's hard to tell where sounds come from. It might work. I circled widely and came back onto the road. I went back behind the garages and sat on the cinder blocks. It was only twenty after nine.

My hand had started to swell a little. The pain was getting worse. I sat and smoked cigarettes until I heard a car come in. I looked around the edge of the garages. Mandy was smart. She had the cab driver pull up so that the cab was out of sight of any of the bedroom windows at

the club When the driver swung around and drove out, I came around the edge of the garages I opened the doors and took the bag from her

I knelt down and opened it, opened the inside bag and took out a sheaf of bills, folded them once and shoved them in my pocket. They were twenties That would be a good size By then she had the luggage compartment open I put the money in there and lowered it so that it didn't slam. It locked itself.

There, in the garages, I held her tightly, the copper hair tickling my cheek She trembled badly. I kissed her and she responded almost savagely. I pushed her away.

"Now get hold of yourself."

"Johnny, did you . . . did you . . ."

"No. I left him tied He'll keep."

"Shouldn't you have . . . done it to him, Johnny."

"Maybe "

"Is it too late now?"

"I can't do it. I thought of it, but I can't."

"He'll get loose and they'll pick us up, Johnny. They'll find Sonny."

"We'll be all right We'll be fine."

"I'm scared."

"Come on. Let's get it over with. Can you do it?"

She squared her shoulders "I can do it."

We went up and woke Sonny up He came awake angry. His blond hair was a tangled mess and his eyes were bleared. "What the hell goes on?"

I had shut the door behind us "Sonny, we just came back from a walk We went down to where the cutoff goes close to the river bank," I said

His eyes were hard on mine. "If you told her what I think you told her, Doyle," he said tonelessly

I said impatiently, "Why don t you shut up and listen? I went down there just to see if everything looked all right. I wasn't going to say a word But Mandy saw something shining down in the water and she moved around on the bank and saw it at the right angle and made out it was the chrome grill of an automobile She got all excited She was going to phone the law because she thought maybe somebody went off by accident So I had to tell her."

He glared at me "You're crazy I went and looked myself yesterday You can't see a thing."

"You can now, Sonny," she said

"Maybe," I suggested, "when it took the dive the front end got all silt. Now the river has washed it off You better come look and figure out what we can do Surer than hell, some kids or somebody is going to spot it "

We had him on the hook. He looked worried He said, "Wait for me downstairs I'll be right down."

I said, "You don t want anybody else to get wise We'll be out behind the garages You come out quietly and join us there and we'll go across lots."

He nodded We went out in back Her fingernails, without polish, had a bluish look I kept my swollen hand stuffed in my pocket. We smoked cigarettes. He was along in about fifteen minutes

"Let's go, kids," he said

WE WALKED on either side of him. I was on his left, closer to the river bank As he walked, he thought out loud, "One thing would be to dive down there and get a cable on it Maybe it could be pulled into a deeper hole It must have got wedged somehow The boys checked with a line and a big sinker and measured it to be nearly seventy feet there "

"Those things happen," I said

I bit the inside of my lip as we neared the spot I could taste the blood He stopped dead "What the hell are those blocks? They weren t there yesterday."

(Please continue on page 116)

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(Continued from page 114)

"Maybe some kids put 'em there," I said casually.

But some of the damage was done He was wary and tense He gave both Mandy and me long hard looks before he stepped forward She was good She walked calmly over and stepped on the bank two feet to the right of the trap She turned and beckoned to Sonny and said, pointing down at the water with the other hand,

"Come over here and take a look, Sonny. Right down there"

I put one foot on top of the three cinder blocks, trying to look as though it were a casual footrest. I didn't watch his feet That would have been too obvious. The muscles in my right leg were tense as I waited for the chomping sound of the trap

"Over this way a little, Sonny. Can't you see it yet? Right down there. Take another half step this way."

My eyes swung toward his feet I couldn't help it. His right foot moved in slow motion, it seemed It shadowed the scrap of cellophane and then came down on it. I heard the crunch of sticks, his intake of breath as he stepped into the unexpected hole The jaws threw the dirt high as they sprang together, the sharp steel teeth cutting through flesh to anchor in the bone itself

Still in slow motion, Mandy leaped to the right Without my willing it, my right leg straightened and the piled cinderblocks toppled off the edge into the bank The water geysered high where they hit and the chain swung tight on the trap, yanking his legs out from underneath him as he screamed

When he fell, he jammed the fingers of both hands deeply into the soil He was bent at the waist, his feet almost in the water, his chest flat against the ground

Mandy came to her feet. We stared at the upturned face, at the fingers socketed in the clay. "Help me," he gasped. "Money . . . lot of it . . . take my hands . ." He slid backward a little.

"It was Johnny Doyle all along," I said, "framing Al and Skip"

Mandy came at him fast She kicked his hands free of the clay. He grabbed at her ankle and missed His fingers slid The blocks dragged him under like a stone, and with surprisingly little noise

We stood and looked at the dark smooth water, at the faint roil of current For an instant I could see his white and diminishing face, and then nothing Then the bubbles gouted up and disappeared.

Then she was laughing and crying all at once. I had to slap her three times to bring her out of it When she came out of it, there was a new coldness about her, a new hardness

"Now we'll never lose each other, Johnny. Now we're tied together for always."

"How do you mean that? Not that it isn't true."

"We'll never dare leave each other"

We went back to the Mad Hatter We went by way of the road I had her wait for me while I circled around through the opposite field and took a look at Goldwine. He didn't see me He was resting. The grass was matted where he had made six laborious feet toward the road No one was in sight I took his ankles and yanked him back a dozen feet His eyes were still calm, almost amused He did not try to speak around the gag

We walked back to the club I looked at my watch I felt as though it should be three o'clock in the afternoon It was only twenty after eleven I got her into the garage without anyone seeing us. She told me where her packed bag was. Mine was in the back of my closet. I went into the club. Karrol was eating breakfast He gave me a cold nod

I brought the suitcases down to go out the front way. Old Tim was polishing the brass work on the door. I had to take the time to hide the bags and send him on an

errand that would take him into the cellar. He had things on his mind. It took close to fifteen minutes to get rid of him.

Then I carried the bags out to the car, threw them in the back and got behind the wheel. I backed it around in a tight fast circle and shot it out onto the speedway. I headed south, away from town. She didn't say a word. We were going a long way south. A long, fast, hard way south.

I tried to talk to her. I tried to lighten the atmosphere. It didn't do any good. Once when I looked at her, she was crying silently. By mid-afternoon we were starved. We ran into a heavy rain. It didn't let up. Dusk came early. I parked in a small city on a back street. She walked through the rain and came back twenty minutes later with a bag of sandwiches and two cartons of coffee.

She whimpered, as we ate, and I put my hand on her shoulder but she pulled away from me. I didn't try again.

When it got darker, I managed to grab a set of plates from the car parked ahead of us, the sweat running down my face, my broken hand torturing me. Outside of the city I pulled off the road. She held the flashlight while I took our plates off and put the borrowed ones on. If I were in luck, the car owner might not notice the loss until a cop stopped him.

I pointed out the route on the map and she took the wheel while I slept on the back seat. I was surprised that I could sleep with the hand acting up the way it was.

At midnight we changed. She got into the back. I drove until dawn. I often heard her moan in her sleep. The road sign said we were fifty miles from Nashville. That was good time. We were doing fine. But I couldn't feel good about it.

I SLOWED down and finally found a little overgrown track where a road had once cut off to the left. I put the

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car in low and jolted and rocked through the shallow ditch. Leaves scraped along the sides. Brush scraped along the bottom of the car. It was thickly overgrown. Several times I thought I was blocked, but each time I kept going. She sat up, dazed, smoothing her hair back.

"Where are we?"

I didn't bother to answer. When I estimated that I was five hundred yards from the road, I found that the way was completely blocked. There was a small clearing there, a crude stone chimney standing in a blackened oblong where a cabin had once been.

We got out. "Have a good sleep?" I asked.

"Not good, Johnny. Not good at all."

"We've got things to do. First we take the stuff out of the car. Then I'm going to ram it as far back into that brush as I can. We're leaving it here."

"Oh, fine," she said.

"You brought the old clothes?"

"You told me to."

We took the bags out of the back end, the suitcases out of the back. I put the sedan in low and aimed it toward a densely overgrown slope. There was no dash throttle. I found a loose rock and tossed it in onto the gas pedal. The edge of the door hit my shoulder and knocked me down.

The car leaped toward the slope and went crashing down. The noises dwindled and stopped. I walked to the edge. I could see one place where the sun hit the gleaming roof. I climbed down and piled brush on it. Mandy was sitting in the patch of morning sun, smoking.

I opened her suitcase and went through her things. She watched me without interest. In the bottom was an envelope full of money. I counted it. A little over a thousand dollars. I tossed it over by the rest of the money. She had brought a faded blue print and an old leather jacket. I

tossed them over to her. "Wear these."

She looked around, then went behind the chimney. I pulled off my clothes, emptied the pockets, put on jeans and a white sweat shirt with a rip in the sleeve. It was hot so I rolled the sleeves up. She came out. She carried the jacket over her arm.

The two suitcases we were going to use looked too new. I scrubbed them with dirt and wood ashes and scuffed the corners against the stone chimney. Then I laid the money out and counted it. It looked unreal against the coarse grass. It took a long time, and it was just a dull job. There was no pleasure in it. It came out to a little over fifty-three thousand apiece, with hers added in. I took the clothes we had taken off and jammed them into the brown bag. After three tries I managed to toss it up so that it fell into the opening in the top of the chimney. I jumped on the other one we were discarding, then threw it into the brush.

Her pocketbook looked too new. I tore off the shoulder strap and bent the clasp and scuffed it up. She made no protest.

"Now we take a rest until traffic gets heavier. Then we go out and hitch into Nashville. We find a cheap room and hole up until we can make new names stick. Mr. and Mrs. Hal Weaver. That'll be as good as anything. If there's a jam, you can run for it. You have half the money.

"We don't want to underestimate Goldwine. He's smart. If we can fix up identities, we can get a cheap car and head southwest for the Mexican border. We ought to be able to get across all right if they don't demand too many documents for a couple of tourist cards. Do you understand?"

She lay back in the grass and looked at me. She spoke as though her lips were stiff. "I should have told you before."

I heard my own voice climb high and loud. "Told me what!"

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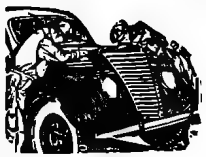

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"They'll say Sonny killed him and then ran for it."

"Killed who?" I demanded, and suddenly, looking at her, I knew what she ment. "How did you do it?"

"There was a wrench in the garage. A heavy one."

I turned away from her. The toneless voice went on, half pleading, "You couldn't do it and it had to be done if we were going to be safe. It had to be done, Johnny."

"Shut your mouth!"

"They'll blame it on Sonny. They won't find Sonny, with Goldwine dead. We'll be safe."

"Safe like churches," I said, knuckling my forehead behind which the pain was starting. "I tied him with my belt. That's handy. The buckle has initials on it. You fixed me good."

I thought of the little man and his calm eyes. I went over to the edge of the clearing and I was sick. I came back and stretched out six feet from her. We didn't look at each other. She lay on her back, her eyes closed.

"It's all done with us, isn't it, Johnny?"

The pain was growing. "Shut up!" I screamed.

It was growing and growing. The needle was quivering. It was about to go into its crazy spin. I felt my breath coming and going, coming and going, too fast. I heard her crawl over to me. She touched me. She moved around so that she could hold my head in her lap. Tears dropped like hot wax onto my face.

"Johnny, Johnny," she moaned, rocking me. I wanted to tell her to stop. I couldn't. The needle had started to spin, tearing the inside of my head to fragments. I couldn't see her face above me any more.

That knotted-cord feeling came into my throat. I knew my mouth was wide open and that I was screaming, screaming, screaming. . . .

There was nothing in the world to cling to. I was spinning, falling, spinning. I reached out to save myself. I reached up to grasp something and save myself from falling down, sliding down over the edge into the blackness that seemed to be reaching up for me, overwhelming me with its force.

* * *

After a long time, I began to slowly come back to life. There was a weight across me. A heavy warm uncomfortable weight.

Then it was contentment to know that the pain had stopped—that I was free of it until the next time. All my muscles were still rigid. I had to will them to slacken, almost one by one. Neck first, and then shoulders, the blessed slackness creeping down my arms to my wrists, to my hands.

My right hand unclasped slowly, with difficulty. Unclasped from flaccid softness.

I sat up. She lay sprawled across me, face down. I rolled her over, away from me. The small of her back was across my ankles.

Mandy's blackened face and her swollen protruding tongue were exposed to the morning sunlight. The marks of the fiingers of my right hand were deep in her throat and my forearm bled where her long, red finger nails had scrabbled against me.

I looked at her for a long time and then pulled my legs gently out from under her, as though careful not to disturb what could no longer be disturbed by anybody.

I took her by the armpits and dragged her over through the ashes and propped her up with her back against the stone chimney.

Then I had to back up and look at

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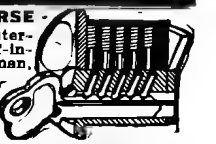

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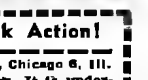

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her many times to get her just right. I couldn't decide whether her hands looked better resting on the ground beside her, or on her lap.

And her head wasn't right. She couldn't see me that way. I had to find a piece of charred wood and prop it under her chin. Then I saw that her hair was mussed. I found her brush in her bag and combed it out.

It was full of snarls, and I was careful not to hurt her.

It placed a terrible burden on me, having to hold up both ends of the conversation.

Getting the money out, I squatted down in the ashes and counted it for her. I counted it a lot of times, out loud, so she could tell how well we had done and how clever we had been. Flies kept coming and buzzing around her mouth and eyes. I got a branch and kept them away from her.

We even talked about Sonny for a little while. Oh, we had so many things to talk about.

Then I told her about Mexico, about how much she'd like Acapulco, where the old tan mountains slope down to the deep blue bay, where we could lie on the beach and eat the shrimp the little girls sell, drink the good cold beer.

It was a happy day. Then when it began to get dark I picked her up and put her across my shoulders. I tied the two suitcases to a necktie and hung them around my neck.

I sang to Mandy as I stumbled back along the track. The birds made sleepy sounds.

And there was something about the psychiatrist Scherta I kept trying to remember. She wouldn't help me. She was oddly cool against my shoulders, and heavy. After all, Mandy Powers was a very big girl.

THE END

(Continued from page 81)

unnerved him more than he'd thought it would. He ended up alone back in his room, drinking out of the bottle he kept for guests.

He knew he must go to the police as he'd planned. He finished his drink and got up to put on his coat. Funny, he'd never known just how good liquor was sometimes. It burned and warmed a man inside, made him think better. He'd just have another drink, then he'd go to the police station and confess.

Bourbon . . . or was it rye? Some kind of whiskey. He must remember the name. Funny how whiskey made the floor roll around. . . .

Someone was pounding on his door, shouting at him to open up. Herbert struggled to his feet. His head was aching terribly and his stomach felt terrible.

The pounding and shouting continued, and slowly it seeped into his numbed senses that it was morning and sunlight was streaming into his room. He knew there was something he should do, but his head was aching so that he felt so sick.

He got the door open and two men were standing there. Vaguely he understood they were detectives. They took him out to a car and down to police headquarters. The air made him feel better. They were telling him about Wanda Blake being murdered.

It was starting to come to him now—the thing he'd forgotten to do. He'd gotten drunk and forgotten to go to the police to tell them about it.

He told them now.

"Brother!" a big policeman said. "Did *you* hang one on!"

The man was saying that Jack Randolph was the murderer! He said Randolph had been caught standing over Wanda Blake with the knife in his hand!

This Randolph was a smooth operator, the police said. He'd stolen the knife from

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Herbert's desk to throw suspicion on Herbert!

Herbert told the detective how he himself had killed Wanda. The detective nodded sympathetically and advised him to stop drinking. Then they started telling him how Jack had admitted going around with Wanda, and how Wanda wanted him to divorce Grace and marry her.

They couldn't be so stupid as not to see that he, Herbert Pettibone, had killed Wanda Blake himself!

Finally, they told him to go home. He wouldn't leave, and finally a big policeman took him by the arm and shoved him out to the sidewalk.

It was all a bad dream, Herbert thought. But someway he must convince them. They couldn't cheat him out of this, too. . . .

AT THE trial, they put him on the stand to identify the knife, and he started telling them how he had whetted it. Jack Randolph's attorney jumped in and tried to help him then. He said if they could find the oilstone, they could prove the knife had been sharpened on it.

The clerk in the hardware store, who'd waited on Herbert, testified that he sold so many, he couldn't be sure he'd sold one to Herbert. Herbert tried to remember where he had thrown the oilstone, but all he could say was he'd put it in an ashcan.

Herbert tried to tell the jury, anyway, that he'd killed Wanda, but they struck out his testimony.

Even then, Herbert didn't believe it until he read the papers. The big headlines—Herbert's headlines—said, RANDOLPH GETS THE CHAIR! The stupid, stupid fools, he thought bitterly.

Herbert went over to see Grace Randolph and comfort her after the trial. She thought he was magnificent, trying to take the blame. She told him so, and he

could see it comforted her to have him around. He went over often after that, during all those months Jack was in prison waiting. He hadn't reckoned on Grace taking it like this.

Herbert began telling himself he had to be strong, because Grace was depending on him so much. But that wasn't all. With Jack gone, he was promoted again to head the department. This time, it wasn't just acting head. He was The Boss.

Herbert and Grace did everything they could for Jack, of course, trying to get a new trial. They even went to the governor, pleading with him to act.

All along, the papers had played it up big, his undying loyalty to his friend. But Herbert had come to realize there was no chance of anyone taking seriously his claim that he had murdered Wanda. It was just heroism, they said. That in itself was evidence of his importance. Things were taking on a new light. It was ironical, he thought, how justice had intervened. Real justice.

It was on their way home after seeing the governor that Grace broke down. The governor had refused to stop the electrocution.

Herbert helped Grace into her house from the car. He laid her on the sofa and went to the kitchen for some water for her to drink. While he was in the kitchen, he heard the shot.

She'd used the gun he'd loaned her so many weeks ago and forgotten about. Herbert felt sick when he realized she was dead. She'd depended on him so, and with Jack gone, he was thinking of taking care of her.

Herbert called the police and told them how Grace Randolph had shot herself while he was getting her a glass of water in the kitchen.

But the fools wouldn't believe him.

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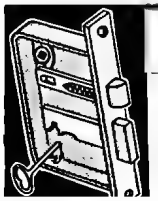

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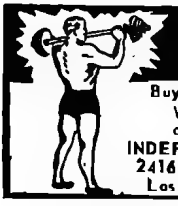

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T. T. Flynn

(Continued from page 78)

Another cry followed as we ran out from the garage. Headlights and a powerful spotlight had emerged from the pine trees and were speeding toward the house. That would be the police car.

The spotlight picked up a great, hairy figure moving in a fast shamble after a man frantically running toward us.

"He met Ko-ko!" I blurted. "Can't they stop that gorilla?"

DON'T tell Mike Harris a gorilla can't run in that awkward crouch of great arms knuckling over the ground. Colson looked over his shoulder as the huge brute came closer to him. We heard his agonized yell of fear.

The guests had heard this. Women screamed and men shouted as they fanned out from the lanterns and looked across the green lawns at the spotlighted, strange sight.

A paw snatched Colson's ankle and heaved the man high as if he had no weight.

Lee Colson screamed again as he was slammed toward the ground. A paw smote him and he tumbled at least ten feet.

The racing police car came abreast and the hammering chatter of a submachine gun assaulted the night. Ko-ko spun around snarling, reared upright and started toward the gun.

It wasn't sporting, but it was quick. Ko-ko went down and was where he fell when we reached the spot. Colson's neck was broken.

Maybe Haig wasn't so wrong, after all. His apes could learn. The homicide men agreed that Ko ko must have been near Waldo Haig when he was shot and realized who had done it. Ko-ko had lingered near the body, grieving, while the knowledge worked in his jungle mind. When he had winded Colson again in the

night, he had gone for the murderer of his friend.

They had Constance Haig's confession within the hour. Joyce Carrol confirmed that Briggs had searched my bag while I was at dinner and found my credentials. He had warned her by telephone that we were probably watching her and Haig. She had come back, talked to Haig in the house over Briggs' telephone, and waited for Haig to leave his guests and talk the matter over with her.

* * *

"I feel sorry for her," Trixie said as a taxi carried us back to town. "She was in love with Haig. They could have been happy."

"Love's pretty swell," I said. "Which reminds me, you looked like a dream tonight, honey."

"Why, Mike," says Trixie tenderly. "I didn't think you ever noticed how I looked."

"I couldn't help noticing," says I, patting Trixie's little hand. "But what a sucker they made out of you, sweetness. It's sure lucky that I was around to save you."

"Don't rub it in, Mike," says Trixie meekly. "You were awfully clever to notice that pine needle."

"Positively brilliant."

Trixie snatched her hand away and quickly let me have it with her acid little tongue.

"Which confirms my opinion, Mike, that you're such a bonehead, you have to be kicked around before you get an idea. Of all the conceited windbags! If we're ever on another case together—"

Which gives you an idea. I put my fingers in my ears. Life at least was always lively with private eyeful Trixie Meehan.

THE END

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

homecoming from the hospital with her five-day-old son. I was preparing lunch for her, when the doorbell rang. Upon my answering it, the young man at the door told me that a survey was being made of the radio programs people were listening to.

I told him about a few that I heard, but he asked for more. Thinking that it must be a real survey, I mentioned that I had a list of the ones I listened to in the house which I would get for him. Before I could return with the paper, he walked into the house. Whether he was pretending or not, I couldn't say, but he checked off a card as he looked at my list.

After this, he began to talk about an encyclopedia set that was being given away to the first fifty persons answering the survey. He showed me pictures from a sample book and told me the advantages of having an encyclopedia set in the home.

All the while he talked—and he certainly could talk—I was under the impression that the set was being given away free. Being in a hurry to get rid of him and under the strain of caring for my sister and her baby—who was crying upstairs—I was very nervous at that time.

I asked, "How do you get the set?" He told me that all I had to do was sign a paper. I did, without reading it—something that I'll never again do.

Then he asked for a deposit, which took me by surprise. I wanted to know why and what for. He answered, to insure that a set would be reserved for me and for delivery charges. Dubiously, I told him that I could only give him a dollar.

"As a rule," he said, "the deposit is five dollars, but I'll let it go if you will pay the balance when the encyclopedia set is delivered in a few days."

With the baby crying harder and my sister calling me, I agreed, just to get him out of the house.

Later that day, while the baby and my sister slept, I read the duplicate of the paper that I had signed. What I read wasn't very clear to me—but one thing I did understand: the set cost $50.00 and was not free.

I became very upset and tried to figure where I could get the money. Every extra dollar we had was now being saved for the hospital and doctor bills. My husband came home after I had shed thousands of tears. He found me in such an emotional state that it took him a long time to calm me and find out what had happened.

After he read the paper that I had signed and learned of how I was being swindled, he assured me that I didn't have to accept the set; therefore I wouldn't have to pay for it. He also impressed upon me that I should never sign anything without first reading it carefully.

When the day came for the set of books to be delivered, I became very nervous and refused to answer the door. The man came several times that day and each day afterward for a week, but I continued to not answer the door.

Finally when a few days had gone by and no

one had shown up, I stopped being afraid and started to relax again. One day when I was expecting visitors, the doorbell rang. I answered it without checking to see who it was, and stood face to face with the man who was delivering the set.

Suddenly I became brave though deeply upset again. I told him as firmly as I could that I didn't want the encyclopedias. When he asked me to sign a paper stating that I refused the set, I told him I would not, that I had learned my lesson from their salesman, who had tricked me into signing a paper for something I did not want.

After giving him the details of what had happened and a description of the salesman, for which he had asked me, he apologized and said that an investigation would be made. A refund couldn't be made on the dollar that I had lost, I was told.

At the time the experience I had was very upsetting to me, but it was a good lesson and has taught me to be more cautious about door-to-door salesmen.

Paula Sheldon
New Haven, Conn.

A Model Poser

Dear Sir:

Some friends of mine encountered an unusual racket. When it was over, they were sadder but wiser, and a little poorer.

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A couple of weeks later they were told to bring the child to a studio to pose. This was done and they received five dollars. The parents were elated.

What happened after that?

Nothing. No more posing.

What did he answer when asked why? That he had fulfilled his part of the contract, all legal-like. Besides, the child wasn't the type, he said. So the parents were out forty-five dollars.

Later, I found out that there were quite a few fond parents who had fallen for the same racket. The fellow knew that the way to doting parents' hearts and pursestrings is through their precious offspring.

Mrs. B. Miller
Los Angeles, Cal.

That winds up our racket news for this month, detective fans. Don't forget that we welcome your letters on your own experiences with swindlers, as they help us all keep ahead of the slick tricksters.

The Editor

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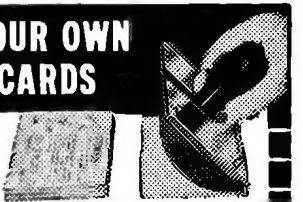

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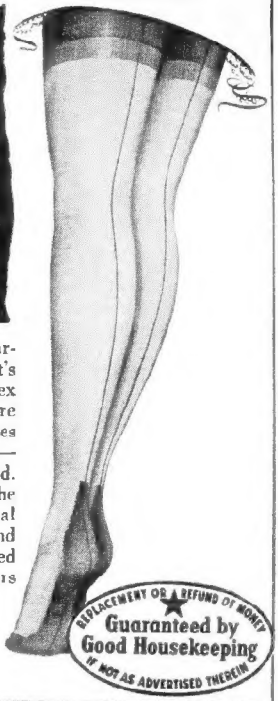

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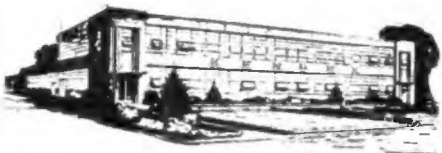

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